WILLIAM COWPER (1731-1800):

STUDIES IN THE POETRY OF AN EVANGELICAL

By

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PREFACE

The origin and reasons for any lengthy study must be complex, and motivations change with the passage of time. My interest in the poetry of William Cowper has been of long standing. Some years ago, interested in both the early Methodists and the poetry of the later eighteenth century, I began reading and became increasingly eager to examine primary sources unavailable in my small, mid-western college and university. Through the kindness of the United States Educational Commission in the United Kingdom, funds were made available to enable me to study both theology and literature in Edinburgh. The first two years were consumed by theological studies more than with literary. The remaining period of study, however, has been given to my primary interest in literature.

Every student from overseas must be grateful for the many kindnesses and courtesies extended to him by the people of the United Kingdom. My stay here has been a particularly happy one, and there are many whom I should like to thank. I am especially grateful to the staffs of various libraries: In Edinburgh, the University Library, the New College Library and the National Library of Scotland; in London, the British Museum; Mr. T. Radmore, former curator of the Olney Museum, Olney; and Mr. John Thornton of Southbourne for permission to examine and use material from the correspondence between John Newton and John Thornton.

I have learned as never before that fruitful scholarship is the result not just of isolated private study but of discussion of ideas and issues with others. I am particularly grateful for the interest and encouragement of a number of people, particularly the members of my supervisory committee: Professor John Butt, Principal J. K. S. Burleigh, Principal Charles S. Duthie and Mr. Mark Kinkead-Weekes. Also helpful on particular points were the late Professor J. G. MacKenzie, the Rev. Dr. Erik Routley and the late Principal John Baillie. Finally, I owe special thanks to Dr. M. A. Tenney, who first introduced me to the poetry of William Cowper, and to Dr. Elva McAllaster, without whose encouragement and sustaining friendship the thesis would never have been completed.

The method of annotation followed is that of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA Style Sheet, Revised) with necessary modifications to adapt it for thesis purposes. Letters is used throughout to refer to the most complete edition of Cowper's correspondence presently available: The Correspondence of William Cowper Arranged in Chronological Order, with annotations by Thomas Wright, 4 volumes, 1904. The text for the poems is that of H. S. Milford, The Poetical Works of William Cowper, Fourth Edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is the critical examination of the poetry of William Cowper as an Evangelical late Augustan. Though writing nearly half a century after Pope, the standards which Cowper set for himself as a poet do not differ as greatly from Augustan practice as has been usually assumed. Both the content and the form of his satires is derivative. Following the pattern established by Watts and the Wesleys, he wrote hymns and paraphrases, usually a sub-literary form. In The Task, he uses the reflective, descriptive poem in a new and fresh way. His shorter lyrics, very few of which are of any value, are frequently informal attempts to write occasional poems on public men and events or fables, a genre for which he depends much on Gay.

In his use of neo-classical forms, however, Cowper shows little ability to understand the careful discrimination of genre characteristic of the Augustans. His satire, therefore, compares unfavourably with that of Pope and also with that of his school friend and contemporary, Charles Churchill. When he attempts a Georgic in The Task, his worst stylistic faults appear. The generally harmful influence of Milton is apparent as well when he uses polysyllabic Latinate adjectives to elevate his diction. In such places, he becomes too frequently inflated and empty.

As an Evangelical, Cowper wrote moral and didactic poetry which, though much of its content may be found paralleled in Augustan satire, is characteristically Evangelical in its earnestness and sombre tone. The basic doctrines of Evangelicalism occur frequently in his poetry, though least offensively in The Task. Sometimes too much the lay-preacher, he saw poetry as a means of proclaiming the Gospel as he understood it. For this prophetic task, he found in the words of Holy Scripture a language dignified by sacred use yet as nobly plain as Homer's Greek. Since the biblical words were understood to have been dictated by the Holy Spirit, they had authority as well as truth and sublime beauty. His use of "scriptural language", as he described it, is seen in almost everything he wrote but most obviously in the Olney Hymns and the moral satires. Even in The Task, however, the Bible is a frequent source for imagery as well as themes.

With his use of Augustan norms and the modification of them by his Evangelicalism as the two points of control, I have attempted to examine his poetry as poetry with a minimum of reference to biographical considerations. In doing so, I have run some hazard, since more than most of his contemporaries, Cowper's poetry gains some of its effectiveness by the colouration of his unusual life and strange delusion. But Cowper frequently has been abused from one point of view or another--attacked for his Evangelicalism and defended for it, reduced to a case study and used to argue that Calvinism drives sensitive poets mad. Being neither an

Evangelical (though I have gained some respect for certain aspects of Evangelicalism from my study) nor a trained psychiatrist, I have not felt myself qualified to judge either his religious faith or to explain the causes of his mental illness.

Since 1928, nine book-length studies of Cowper have been published, seven of which are primarily biographical rather than critical.[1] During the past year, Mrs. Norma Russell's definitive bibliography of Cowper has appeared, and Professor Lodwick Hartley has recently updated his helpful list of studies as well as presenting a provocative and solid description of the fluctuations in his poetic reputation.[2] Charles Ryskamp's William Cowper, of the Inner Temple, Esq. (1959) will long be the standard study of his early life to 1767.

The wealth of earlier biographical studies has sketched in his Evangelical background and debated its effect upon his psychosis. The teasing question of the nature of his illness and its cause, especially its psycho-sexual origins, has sent some prying again and scanning his poetry for revealing expressions and images. The result has been varied, but the general result has been an increasing, and perhaps now adequate, knowledge of his life. What has been needed is a more critical examination of his poetry.

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[1] Hugh I'Anson Fausset, William Cowper (1928); Lord David Cecil, The Stricken Deer, or The Life of Cowper (1929); Gilbert Thomas, William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century (1935;1949); Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper, Humanitarian (1938); Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (1951); Maurice J. Quinlan, William Cowper, A Critical Life (1953); Roderick Huang, William Cowper, Nature Poet (1957); and Morris Golden, In Search of Stability: The Poetry of William Cowper (1960).

[2] Norma Russell, A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837 (1963); Lodwick Hartley, William Cowper: The Continuing Revaluation. An Essay and a Bibliography of Cowperian Studies from 1895 to 1960) (1960).

Several books and articles have appeared which examine various aspects of Cowper's poetry. Charles Van Doren's "The Early Poetry of William Cowper" (1960) is a valuable reading of Cowper's early work in order to select that which is of enduring value.[3] Donald A. Davie's "Critical Principles of Cowper" (1953), the most important article to appear, discusses Cowper's views of how poetry should be written in relation to his own writing and that of Matthew Prior, whom he so greatly admired.[4] Davie's article emphasizes the need to see Cowper more within the tradition of neo-classic poetry and less as a religious fanatic or pre-romantic.

Only two scholars have attempted an assessment of Cowper's poetic practice as it was influenced by his Evangelicalism. Norman Nicholson's study is, I believe, the best book to appear on Cowper. It is not, however, a detailed study and is more important for his sympathetic understanding of Cowper's religious position and its effect upon his writing, especially the Olney Hymns. Professor Huang's William Cowper, Nature Poet (1957) is a valuable study of how Cowper's reading of the Evangelical James Hervey influenced his understanding of nature and the way he described it.

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[3] Charles Van Doren, "The Early Poetry of William Cowper," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1959 [copyright, 1960].

[4] Donald A. Davie, "The Critical Principles of William Cowper," The Cambridge Journal, VII, No. 3 (December, 1953), pp. 182-188. "After Ben Jonson, Cowper is the most neglected of our poets. It was Hayley's Life and Letters that set the fashion; ever since, no poet has surrendered so frequently, and with so little compunction, to the tender mercies of the biographer" (p. 182).

It seemed, therefore, an appropriate time to essay a more general critical examination of his poetry exclusive of his translations. By limiting my study somewhat to his use of scriptural language, I necessarily became more involved with a consideration of Evangelicalism than I had originally intended. However, my discussion of its influence upon his work has led me to somewhat different conclusions than others have reached who were more concerned with biographical problems.

The second chapter attempts no more than a sketch of his life through 1785 and a more detailed discussion of the religious background, especially the Evangelical use of the Bible, necessary for the examination of his poetry. It is not intended as a thorough or complete discussion of Evangelicalism. The third chapter is a study of the Olney Hymns as an example of how the Bible came to shape and colour Cowper's language and to provide for him a potent collection of images with special authority. The moral satires published in 1782 are examined for their diction and imagery and the special problem which the writing of satire created for Cowper as an Evangelical. The Task, I hope to show, is Cowper's mature use of scriptural language and imagery within the tradition of the didactic, descriptive poetry as especially exemplified in Thomson's Seasons. The shorter lyrics are not studied in detail except the few which show Cowper's finest achievement as a poet, especially "Yardley Oak" and "The Castaway".

His correspondence, translations and Thomas Scott's Force of Truth (1779), which Cowper edited "as to style and externals, but not otherwise", I have not used as objects of close study in themselves, but for comment on Cowper's poetic practice and to illuminate ideas less fully expressed in his poetry.

Although I have concentrated more on Cowper's use of the Bible and its imagery, I do not wish to imply that this exhausts his poetry or fully explains it. This is only one, and I feel an important and neglected, part of the study of his poetry.

In preparing this study, I have been given access to unpublished letters not consulted by students of Cowper's poetry, especially the correspondence of John Newton with John Thornton during the years 1765 to 1780. I have also consulted the manuscript materials at the Cowper Museum, Olney, and at the British Museum. It is, however, with regret that I note my inability to see the "Norfolk MSS" owned by the late Professor Neilson Campbell Hannay which was recently purchased by Mr. Robert H. Taylor and given to the Princeton University Library.

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM COWPER OF OLNEY

Olney today is little changed outwardly from the village it was in the last half of the eighteenth century. The main street divides near the centre of the town to form an elongated triangle with Orchard Side, Cowper's house, at its base. An undistinguished village, the only other buildings of interest are the parish church of St. Peter and the vicarage, still an attractive house. Olney was never a prosperous town; its principal industry was lace-making. During the winter months, Olney is drab, damp, and cold. On the whole, it was not a place in which one would choose to live. Yet Cowper lived in Olney for nineteen years from September 1767 until November 1786.

When Cowper arrived in Olney with Mary Unwin and her son, William, and daughter, Susanna, he did not come for the beauties of the village or the countryside. In contrast to the outward drabness of the village, the interior life was colourfully rich. Unhappy with the spiritual drabness of Huntingdon and the gossip of their neighbours, William and Mary came seeking a modern prophet, the Rev. John Newton, who could feed their religious appetites with more imaginative fare than rational morality and ethics. A few years before, however, Cowper had been the more typical eighteenth-century young man of good family.

Early Life

The early life of Cowper has been admirably treated by Charles Ryskamp.[1] Dr. Ryskamp's study, however, ends with Cowper's departure for Olney. I wish only to sketch the general pattern of events before this move and then to stress those aspects of his life in Olney which are of particular importance for understanding his Evangelicalism and his poetry.

In the Rectory of St. Peter's Church, Berkhampstead, Hertfordshire, William Cowper was born to the Rev. John Cowper (1694-1756) and his wife, Ann Donne Cowper (1703-1737), on the 15th November 1731 O.S. William was their third child, the first to survive infancy. Three other children were born later to the Rectory, but only the last, John (1737-1770), lived beyond childhood. His birth, however, took the life of the mother.

William's childhood, except for the loss of his mother, was not unusual and was reasonably happy. He attended school briefly in Berkhampstead and was then sent to Aldbury to study under the Reverend William Davis, a friend of his father. At six, he entered boarding school at Markyate Street in Bedfordshire under the Reverend William Pittman. At eight, suffering from "specks" on his eyes, he was placed for two years in the home of Mrs. Disney, an oculist.

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1. Charles Ryskamp, William Cowper of the Inner Temple, Esq. (1959).

After these rather brief and fragmentary episodes of learning, at the age of ten he was enrolled at Westminster School, London.

The seven years at Westminster were among the more stable of his early life. In spite of some preoccupation with various illnesses, he was reasonably healthy; and though never robust, he did participate actively in games. He was subjected to the usual harrassment by boys older and stronger than himself, but his response does not appear to have been morbid. He made friends with some of his more gifted contemporaries, he enjoyed his study of the classics especially, and he had the family circle of his cousins in Southampton Row to which he was welcomed. Three cousins, including Martin Madan, were also at Westminster at the same time. Something of a school-boy snob, and probably a little priggish, he says he then "valued a man according to his proficiency and taste in classical literature, and had the meanest opinion of all other accomplishments unaccompanied by that".[1]

In discussing these years in his Memoir, Cowper saw this as a time of religious awakening. For all the heightened colouring which he gave to intimations of God's prevenient grace drawing him toward conversion, Cowper appears little more than conventionally religious as a boy. All Cowper was later to detect in his early religious experiences was an insensibility to God, but his experiences are little different from those of any sensitive and intelligent child if the Evangelical colouring of the Memoir is removed.

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1. Letters, I,p.271.

Since the chief source for information on this period of his life is his Memoir, written for Mary Unwin while at Huntingdon during the first flush of his Evangelical conversion, all the events of his childhood are seen as the special working of God's providence drawing the reluctant and rebellious sinner to His embrace. The account tells more about Cowper the Evangelical than of Cowper the boy. It would be a mistake to accept the morbid searching after his fatal sin with its neurotic overtones as an accurate indication of his life at Westminster.

That Cowper did not see these years in perspective when writing about them in his Memoir is partially the result of the genre. One of the conventions of Evangelical life was the composition of religious autobiographies which traced God's dealings with the individual up through his conversion. These were circulated in manuscript among the convert's family and friends and many were published.[1] Wesley included one in each issue of his Arminian Magazine, and John Newton's Authentic Narrative (1764) is one of his best known and most readable.[2]

The writing of such autobiographies was intended to confirm the convert in his faith. By examining his early life, he might thereby trace the mysterious ways of God in his life. By seeing how Providence had brought him safely through previous troubles, he might gain faith that he would persevere to the end.

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[1] Cowper, however, had reservations about their being trusted to an "unlighten'd Person". The Unpublished and Uncollected Letters of William Cowper (1925), p.29.

[2] See also Thomas Jackson, (ed.) Lives of Early Methodist Preachers (1865).

Their circulation and publication was intended as an encouragement to the faint hearted and as a testimony to the unconverted of what God was doing in the lives of those who humbly acknowledged him. The incidents chosen were remarkably similar: early doubts about traditional Christian beliefs (often aroused by reading Deistic writers), moral failure, insensitivity to God's wooing Spirit and rebellion against Evangelical truth when it was first heard. Catastrophes of various kinds are seen as God's way of subduing and humbling the rebellious one until he confesses his sin and waywardness and acknowledges his dependence upon grace alone for pardon and restoration. Conversion is followed by unspeakable joy, usually clumsily expressed in the limited and heavily biblical language of the Evangelicals.

As Ryskamp says of Cowper's writing while at Huntingdon,

> ...he twisted powerful metaphors to describe circumstances in the lives of eighteenth-century Christians. The result did not create impassioned expressions or suggest fervid emotion. It was just the opposite: the language was an inadequate realization of the feelings and caused many to be suspicious about their source and power. The style seemed intellectually lazy; the old cliches were hollow. The rhetoric was a lie to the actual sincerity.[1]

There is a joy and fervour conveyed, however, in spite of the language.

Cowper's Memoir sifts his early years for evidence of God's providential care and presents "religious documents" to show how God in his sovereign freedom had early begun to teach him the fundamentals of Evangelical truth.

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[1]Ryskamp, pp. 173-174.

He selected three incidents from his years at Westminster. First he was taught the joy that comes from a dependence upon God rather than upon his own resources. Soon after arriving he had been beaten and tormented by an older and stronger boy. Unhappy and terrified that the bully might return, he was comforted by the words of the Psalms which came to his mind, "I will not be afraid of what man can do unto me".

> I applied this to my case, with a degree of trust and confidence in God, that would have been no disgrace to a much more experienced Christian. Instantly I perceived in myself a briskness of spirits, and cheerfulness, which I had never before experienced; and took several paces up and down the room with joyful alacrity, - his gift in whom I trusted. Happy had it been for me, if this early effort towards a dependence on the blessed God had been frequently repeated by me. But alas! it was the first and last instance of the kind, between infancy and manhood.[1]

Secondly, he learned that he was mortal and therefore a dependent being subject to the will of God. While crossing St. Margaret's churchyard in late evening and seeing a light, he found a grave-digger at work by the light of his lantern. A skull thrown up by the workman struck Cowper on the leg.

> This little accident was an alarm to my conscience; for that may be numbered among the best religious documents which I received at Westminster. The impression, however, presently went off, and I became so forgetful of mortality, that strange as it may seem, surveying my activity and strength, and observing the evenness of my pulse, I began to entertain, with no small complacency, a notion, that perhaps I might never die! This messenger from the Lord, however, did his errand, and perfectly convinced me that I was mortal.[2]

Thirdly, he was shown how inadequate his own strivings after salvation were without God's efficient call.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 25-26. [2] Ibid. pp. 27-28.

In preparing for confirmation, he attempted private prayer, but "being little accustomed to that exercise of the heart, and having a very childish notion of religion", he found it a "difficult and painful task", and was frightened at his own insensibility.[1] Once confirmed, he soon neglected his prayers and "relapsed into a total forgetfulness of God, with the usual disadvantages of being more hardened, for having been softened to no purpose".[2] The young Cowper also learned that God may employ suffering as a means of teaching the elect their dependence upon Him. The lesson of suffering may, however, be to no effect if the heart and mind are unenlightened and passive.

On April 29, 1748, Cowper entered the Middle Temple to begin the study of law. The years spent at the Temple, though professionally more productive than Cowper admitted, were abundantly fruitful in personal and literary friendships.[3] With John Duncombe, he translated Horace and Voltaire's Henriade. And to The Connoisseur, edited by Bonnell Thornton and George Colman, he contributed a few essays. With them he was a member of the Nonsense Club and lived to some extent the life of the fashionable young gentleman of London.

His adventures in the city appear to have been mild. He drank enough to be slightly drunken, and argued strongly for revealed doctrines against the natural theology of his Deist friends.

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1. Ibid., p.6.
2. Ibid.
3. See Ryskamp, p.68.

> ...I never failed to assert the truth of it with much vehemence of disputation; for which I was the better qualified, having been always an industrious and diligent inquirer into the evidences, by which it was externally supported.... Thus have I been employed, when half intoxicated, in vindicating the truth of scripture, while in the very act of rebellion against its dictates.[1]

There is no evidence that he consorted with women since one of his thoughts when he feared himself eternally damned was that he had not rioted in the sins of the flesh but had lived a careful life.

His cousins in Southampton Row provided some of the stability of a home for him, and Cowper's uncle, Ashley Cowper, became a father to him and secured several sinecures for him. He spent all of his free time with his uncle's family and fell in love with his cousin Theadora. With them he attended church and apparently was happy.

All appears promising until a closer examination is made. His uncle forbad the marriage to his cousin Theadora either because of the closeness of the relationship or because he detected in the young man symptoms of emotional instability. He already was suffering from occasional and somewhat severe periods of depression. For relief he made a holiday to New Forest for several months where the fresh air and change of scenery raised his spirits for a time.

When Ashley Cowper appointed him to the Clerk of the Journals in the House of Lords, however, a political rival insisted on the examination of the appointee before the House.[2]

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1. Ibid., pp.37-38.

2. See Ryskamp, pp.148-154, for a careful and well-documented discussion of the incident.

Cowper was given time to prepare for the test, but as the day neared, he found it impossible to continue. In the Memoir he graphically tells how in despair and anxiety, he attempted suicide the night before the examination. His uncle was notified and members of the family came to the aid of the distraught young man. His brother John was his strongest support but could do nothing to raise the cloud of despair which now enveloped him. In the hope of religious consolation, his cousin, Martin Madan, Chaplain to the Lock Hospital, was called. Madan had been converted under the preaching of John Wesley but had differed with Wesley over theology and identified himself with the Calvinistic wing of the Evangelical Revival opposed to the Wesleys' Arminianism. Madan appears to have been the first to present Evangelical doctrines to Cowper. But nothing could now penetrate the deepening gloom.

Within a few days, his depression reached a crisis resulting in insanity. Fortunately his family were able to place him under the care of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton who operated the Collegium Insanorum at St. Albans. Dr. Cotton's care of the emoti[illegible]l was advanced for the time, and Cowper gradually improved under h[illegible] sympathetic care. By mid-June, 1765, he was sufficiently well to leave for Cambridge to be near his brother John. On the 22nd of June he had settled at Huntingdon, near enough to Cambridge without being a constant burden to his brother, and accompanied by Sam Roberts, who had served him at St. Albans, and Dick Coleman, a lad of only seven whom Cowper wished to "rescue" from a drunken cobbler father. Central in Cowper's recovery at St. Albans was his conversion to Evangelical Christianity.

Evangelicalism

The doctrines of Evangelicalism were not new to one who accepted and believed the fundamental teachings of the English Church as stated in its articles of religion, its prayer book and homilies.[13] The Church had clearly stated the doctrines which the Evangelicals considered central: Man is basically sinful as a result of the original Fall of Adam, but he has been redeemed through the birth, obedient life and sacrificial death of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. God the Father is actively working through the Holy Spirit in the Church, which is the body of Christ, and in the hearts and lives of those who trust him. And man is dependent upon God's electing grace (though how election was to be explained was a point of dispute among the Evangelicals) for salvation and final perseverance. John Wesley, George Whitefield and John Newton consistently appealed to the official statements of the church as trustworthy and sound interpretations of the Bible, always their final and fundamental authority.

The antagonism which the Evangelicals aroused in churchmen and their fellow Christians was partially the result of the widespread dissemination of Deistic views during the first half of the century. The success of the new science, especially mathematics, had come as the culmination of a steady attack from a rationaliatic and sceptical position upon traditional authority as represented by the church.

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13. L. E. Elliott-Binns, The Early Evangelicals (1953), p 382.

The Reformation itself had contributed to this attack by placing the integrity of the individual conscience, guided by and finally responsible only to God and his word as contained in the Bible, at the heart of the question of authority. With every man his own interpreter, common ground was to be found only in reason. Revelation, once the authority of the church was rejected, fell victim to reason which had abundantly proved its adequacy to answer questions through its success in explaining the natural order.

The debate between the supporters of reason versus revelation over the adequacy of the book of nature in contrast to the Bible, the revealed word of God, was of such fundamental importance to the Christian faith that it drew many Christians into the consideration of basic questions of a theoretical and metaphysical nature and diverted them from the traditional question of piety, of how to live the Christian life and overcome the world, the flesh and the devil.

The new science saw nature as a material creation, and for many a demonstration of God's existence as well. Newton and Boyle turned to nature as the best demonstration of God. Newton and others believed the universe had been created by God--few would have thought, or at least expressed the view, that there was no God--and by a study of nature and its laws they felt men could determine the attributes and qualities of God. They saw the universe as well ordered and operated by these readily definable natural laws which were beyond change. But when the materialistic philosophy of Hobbes was consistently applied, the traditional view of God as a being personally interested in earthly affairs was called into question by those less pious than Newton.

The Old Testament became a collection of Hebrew myths instead of history, the New Testament, a collection of moral sayings and Jesus only a fine example to follow.[14]

If nature was governed by laws, they concluded that man's life must also be so governed, and by his reason he could find all that was necessary for the good life. They believed that human nature was uniform. Reason, they felt,

> ...is identical in all men; and the life of reason therefore, it is tacitly or explicitly inferred, must admit of no diversity. Differences in opinion or in taste are evidences of error, and universality of appeal or acceptance tends to be taken, not merely as an effect, but as in itself a mark or criterion, of truth....[15]

In application this "law" could have far reaching effects. In religion, for example, Christianity became suspect because of the lack of universality or uniformity in its "facts". The birth of Christ was a unique and unnatural event which occurred in a corner of the world, and Christian dogmas were not to be grasped or fully explained by reason. "The only religion, therefore, which could claim credence from any must be the religion of nature--'of nature' here signifying primarily and most essentially uniformity and universality."[16] It was assumed that all individuals were basically alike, since reason was possessed by all, and truth was to be determined by each individual through "the exercise of his private judgment uninfluenced by tradition or external authority; in other words, by 'the pure light of nature' which shines in all alike."[17]

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14. C. J. Abbey and J. H. Overton, The English Church in the Eighteenth Century (1878), I, p. 527.
15. Arthur O. Lovejoy, Essays in the History of Ideas (1948), pp. 79-80.
16. Ibid., pp. 81-82. 17. Ibid., p. 82.

True religion, therefore, became that which everybody knows. "To judge how far a 'particular faith' coincides with this norm you may ask...whether any of its articles 'be not controverted among foreign nations, among whom other faiths are received.'"[18] The true religion could be found in examining all religions of the world and discarding all beliefs not found in every one of them.[19] The result was largely a general intellectual code of ethics. The differences between pagan religions and Christianity were minimized; the pagan had elements to contribute to the true religion as well as Christianity.

The application of these ideas to Christianity in the Deistical Controversy brought devastating results. Matthew Tindal opened the discussion with his Christianity as Old as the Creation (1730) which stated the position of the Deists. His appeal was to the uniformity of God's laws found in Creation. William Law, the influential mystic generally admired by the Evangelicals, wrote in reply a defense of revealed religion, The Case of Reason, or Natural Religion, Fairly and Fully Stated (1732), questioning the capacity of human, finite reason to know God apart from Grace. The most admired and widely read, however, was Joseph Butler's The Analogy of Religion to the Constitution and Course of Nature (1773), which argued from a moral sense in man, his conscience, as authority.

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[18] Ibid., p. 83. [19] Ibid., p. 83.

The Deists were in complete accord on many points with the more liberal elements in the Church of England. With the Socinians they denied the personality of the Holy Spirit; they rejected the concept of a satisfaction or atonement for sin achieved through the death of Christ; they were suspicious of the miraculous in Christianity; and they were exorbitant, according to the orthodox, in their exaltation of reason.[20]

With the exception of William Law, the defenders of revealed religion granted to the Deists the choice of common ground for the debate. Instead of arguing from the Bible and tradition, they accepted the Deistic premise that God was demonstrably present in nature and turned all their attention to the search for evidences of Christianity found there. At a time when moral leadership and exhortation were needed, the pulpits resounded with theological arguments.

> Above all, reason was called to decide upon questions before which man's reason stands impotent; and imagination and emotion, those great auxiliaries to all deep religious feeling, were bid to stand rebuked in her presence, as hinderers of the rational faculty, and upstart pretenders to rights which were not theirs. 'Enthusiasm' was frowned down, and no small part of the light and fire of religion fell with it.[21]

The preoccupation with the controversy by the clergy was destructive to the religious life of England. Reason which had been conceived by the Cambridge Platonists to be a means of finding divine truth, was now merely an instrument by means of which one proved propositions and established conclusions.

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[20] Abbey and Overton, op. cit., I, p. 527. [21] Ibid., p. 5.

Faith disjoined from reason may result in credultity, but reason is no substitute for faith. Faith and reason were united in traditional Christian faith. Reason and faith were combined to solve moral and metaphysical problems. Reason, however, had come to be supreme and any divergence from its norm was severely chastened. Extremes were to be avoided, and moderation came to occupy the position of a guiding principle. It is said that the two favourite texts of Anglican ministers of the century were: "Be not righteous overmuch", and "Let your moderation be known unto all men". It had become unfashionable to be orthodox or to take the Christian faith seriously. Bishop Butler in his Advertisement to the first edition of the Analogy said:

> It is come, I know not how, to be taken for granted, by many persons, that Christianity is not so much as a subject of inquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious. And accordingly, they treat it as if, in the present age, this were an agreed point among all people of discernment, and nothing remained but to set it up as a principal subject of mirth and ridicule, for its having so long interrupted the pleasures of the world.

Montesquieu mentions in his Notes (1773), "If one speaks of religion, every one laughs, the very phrase, 'an article of faith,' provokes ridicule." In France he passed for having too little religion, but in England he was thought to have too much. The Deists, however, should not be held responsible for the presumed decline in personal religion and ethics in early eighteenth-century England.

They did not object to the moral restrictions of orthodox Christianity but to its non-rational, supernatural basis.

The over-emphasis upon the rational side of Christian theology did result, however, in a lack of emphasis upon practical and personal religion. For many, their basis for faith, and morals the accepted ideas of Christianity for generations, had been greatly weakened if not destroyed. The clergy in its preoccupation with the controversy neglected the duties assigned to them. The uneducated ceased to attend the services of the Church where ideas, which were largely beyond their capabilities, were discussed, and the churches in the new industrial centres of the North did not expand to meet the needs of the lower classes which had flocked to the cities.

The Bible, which the Reformers had taught was an adequate guide to salvation, had become a human book, not a revelation of God and His workings with men. The Church was no longer the vehicle chosen of God to interpret His revelation. The Creator himself was but an absentee landlord who had made the world, the "best of all possible worlds", set it into motion governed by unchangeable laws of nature, and had gone on a long journey. He could not be expected to commune with His creation. He was not a personal saviour, for man needed no saviour when he used his reason efficiently. Sin was not caused by the basic sinfulness of man's nature, but by his failure to use his reason, his common sense.

As Bishop Warburton said, "At length the great Gospel-principles of Faith...came to be held by many as Fanatical....Morality was advanced so high, and Faith frittered into nonsense, that a new Definition of our religion, (namely that it was only this republication of the law of nature) in opposition to its Founders, and unknown to its early Followers, was grown to be the fashionable tenet of the times."[22]

The answers provided by reason may have been sufficient for many of the intellectuals, but for the common man, God had to be something more than a geometric proposition. He wanted to know God for himself; he wanted to feel God's presence in everyday life; he wanted to have his sense of guilt replaced by the assurance that his sins were forgiven. While the Deistic Controversy occupied the minds of many of the clergy, others in the church realized the need was not for a change of creed, not for a new rational basis for faith, but for a creative application in life of what most already knew and believed. Jesus' comment that men must become child-like to enter the Kingdom of Heaven suggested that the individual need not know the answers to the questions asked by the Deists; for such men a satisfactory faith should be "heart-warming", individual and supra-rational.

The Evangelical Revival, which began while Cowper was at Westminster, reacted against Deism in two essential ways.

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[22] The Doctrine of Grace (1763), pp. 316ff. Quoted by L. E. Elliott-Binns, The Early Evangelicals (1953), p. 382.

It reasserted orthodox Christian theology as expressed through the Reform tradition, and it rejected the rationalistic and mechanical interpretations of creation and the Bible in favour of an "experimental" religion.

When Cowper first heard Evangelical doctrine, he could assent to the truth of its orthodox teachings with his mind, but could not "lay hold" of it with his heart. When his Cousin Martin Madan was called to talk with him following his attempted suicide and before going to St. Albans, he taught Cowper of

> Original sin, and the corruption of every man born into the world, whereby everyone is a child of wrath;....the all-atoning efficacy of the blood of Jesus, and his righteousness for our justification....Lastly, he urged the necessity of a lively faith in Jesus Christ; not an assent only of the understanding, but a faith of application, an actual laying hold of it, and embracing it as a salvation wrought out for me personally....He told me it was the gift of God, which he would bestow upon me. I could only reply, "I wish he would:" a very irreverent petition; but a sincere one, and such as the blessed God, in his due time, was pleased to answer.[23]

In these few pages of the Memoir, Cowper gives a brief, clear and comprehensive summary of the doctrines which he was to accept and defend throughout his life in letters and in verse.

Cowper never appears to have doubted the traditional doctrine of original sin. He saw man as a creation of God but totally depraved through the Fall of Adam whose original sin was inherited by all. In a letter to Newton (August 6, 1785), after the publication of The Task, he wrote:

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[23] Memoir, pp. 83-85.

> ...the heart is a nest of serpents, and will be such while it continues to beat. If God cover the mouth of that nest with his hand, they are hush and snug; but if he withdraw his hand, the whole family lift up their heads and hiss, and are as active and venomous as ever. This I always professed to believe from the time that I had embraced the truth, but never knew it as I know it now. To what end I have been made to know it as I do, whether for the benefit of others or for my own, or both, or for neither, will appear hereafter.[24]

Man, if this be a true description of his character, will perish eternally and justly, Cowper felt, if he were not redeemed by the blood of Christ imputed to the individual through God's election.

Traditional Christianity tries to balance the doctrines of the incarnation and atonement in its theology of redemption. The Evangelicals, however, tended to overstress the atonement and to develop a rigidly forensic theology of the Cross. For them, the cross was the centre of the Gospel, and they therefore stressed in unqualified, literal terms the bloody saving death of Jesus. The role of the incarnation and obedient life of Jesus in redemption were somewhat neglected. This led at least superficially to an extreme hyper-Calvinistic emphasis on predestination as God's mode of electing certain men to salvation.

The benefits of Christ's passion are a gift, not something to be worked for or deserved, but "imputed" to the sinner. The obedient life of the Son and his sacrificial death for man's sin are imputed to the elect who are disobedient and sinful.

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[24] Letters, II, p. 345.

It is an objective doctrine of redemption which points away from the individual's preoccupation with sins to the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ. The gracious God in his inscrutable wisdom and mercy elects a favoured few to eternal salvation, but the rest of mankind are left to eternal damnation. The conflict between God's justice and his mercy meet in the cross where Jesus bore the sins of the world upon himself. Though God's mighty acts in Jesus Christ are always prior to men's actions, the Evangelicals insisted that the individual, in a derivative and dependent way, participated in his own salvation through repentance and faith.

The conflict between a limited free will and theological determination was one which splintered the Evangelical Revival into two major branches, one supporting hyper-Calvinism and the other the more tolerant theology of Arminianism. The Calvinist Controversy raged around Cowper, but he was not directly engaged in it, though a few of his hymns may have been used for polemic purposes. John Newton, though he believed Calvin to be nearer the truth of the matter than Arminius, was tolerant and worked for a closer co-operation between the groups.[25] His correspondence with John Wesley, over the disputed doctrines of predestination and of Christian perfection, reveal a man interested in peace and unwilling to quarrel over terminology when there was agreement on essentials.

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[25] Adelaide E. Thein, "The Religion of John Newton," Philological Quarterly, XXI (1942), pp. 146-170, fails to consider Newton's conciliatory statements. Hugh l'Anson Fausset, William Cowper (1928) also is extreme in his condemnation of Newton. Gilbert Thomas, William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century (1949), is more balanced and just.

Any attempt to win men to Christianity must assume at some stage that they have at least the limited ability to refuse the call of God upon them. Central in the resolution of this conflict is the role of proclamation in the Reformed and Evangelical tradition. Cowper gives a pivotal importance to proclamation of the Gospel in his poetry. Faith, for the Evangelical, is the result of obedient hearing, and much therefore depends on the faithful and obedient proclamation of the Gospel by the minister. His primary responsibility was the faithful explication and application of the Holy Scriptures to the lives of his parishoners. If the ordained are disobedient in life and doctrine, the people will "perish". When rightly and faithfully proclaimed, the words of Scripture may be used by the Holy Spirit to illuminate the darkest heart and life. To this call, the individual may listen and "receive" the Gospel. He may also reject it, but if he is among the elect, he cannot finally perish or fall away. Man's act of "hearing", or accepting the Gospel, was not seen as an act of complete freedom on the part of a man. The common experience of the converted is the discovery after conversion that God had been active for some time providentially preparing the ground and planting the seed. Through prevenient grace, an individual co-operates with the Spirit in his own salvation.

The content of Evangelical proclamation was twofold. It first pointed away to the God in Jesus Christ who, "while we were yet sinners", died for mankind.

Secondly, it was "prophetic". The faithful minister is both priest and prophet. As prophet, he denounces national and personal sins, declares the eternal wrath of God against evil and warns of the eternal punishment in store for those who persist in their prideful rebellion against God. The predictive aspect of prophecy was not greatly pursued except as an interpretation of biblical passages on the Last Things. The Evangelical saw the age as one of great sin and wickedness and fully expected the imminent return of the Christ. Their sermons, therefore, are characteristically moral rather than theological. Their message was, "Repent, for the Day of the Lord is at hand". The prophetic task of the minister replaced the priestly. As Archbishop Benson said, "They are happy in the Court of Israel and in the Court of Women. They have never seen the Court of the Priests."[26]

The condemnation of sin, however, was followed by a keen pastoral supervision and care, especially for the converted. The life of John Newton at Olney was an example of constant service to his parish, both in pointing out their sins and also by doing all good in his power in quite concrete ways. His zeal in helping others was instrumental in awakening the conscience of Thomas Scott, a young minister in a neighbouring parish. Later converted to Evangelicalism he became a noted commentator on the Scriptures and through his pious autobiography, The Force of Truth (1779), (which Cowper edited for him), he influenced the young John Henry Newman.[27]

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[26] Quoted by Elliott-Binns, op. cit., p. 395.

[27] John Henry Cardinal Newman, Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1864), p. 5.

The burden of proclamation, however, was also shared by the laity. The early Methodist class-leader aided the minister in the spiritual supervision of the ten to fifteen members of his "class", a religious cell group which met weekly for prayer and, at least at first, rather thorough mutual examination of consciences.[28] After his conversion at St. Albans, Cowper accompanied Madan and Newton on short preaching trips and aided Newton in the distribution of goods to the needy, deserving poor of the Olney community.

In response to the proclamation, those predestined to salvation will hear and be given faith. The nature of human response was what gave to Evangelicalism its distinctive outlook. To be saved from eternal damnation, man must turn to God (though he is led to this and is supported through it by the Holy Spirt, God's prevenient grace) in repentance and faith and be converted. This conversion , it was insisted, was instantaneous and required of all. By faith, not of works, the question of how to describe or explain man's role in the paradox of grace was a vexed one.

The value placed by the Evangelicals upon individuals and "sensory" realization of religious truth may owe much to John Locke. Locke's empirical method was now applied to the universality of the spiritual sense.

> ...Wesley was in harmony with the eighteenth century school of empiricists. He believed in making experience the final test of

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[28]Leslie Church, The Early Methodist People (1953), pp. 149-181.

> truth. He agreed with Pope that "the proper study of mankind is man," and with Hume that since "all sciences have a relation ...to human nature" the proper philosophy is the construction of a science of man. To these empirical views he added his own version: theology, the science of God, should also be constructed upon human experience, "the experience of God in the soul of man." Upon man's experience with the supersensual world by way of faith the fundamental Christian doctrines he believed must finally be built, and any doctrine which did not stand this test he would not accept as fundamental. Testimony to religious experience thus acquired with him a scientific significance.[29]

It was an "experimental" knowledge of Christ that was emphasized throughout the Revival. This meant that the individual was to find for himself, was to see and to feel for himself, that Christ was his saviour. Such a concept could degenerate into a neurotic preoccupation with one's feelings and moods. But the Evangelical promise that assurance of salvation was attainable by all must have appealed to the masses of people confused and bewildered by the chill winds of scepticism, and particularly to Cowper.

Although this emphasis upon the trustworthiness of the human emotions in the search for truth was important, the Evangelicals constantly asserted the reasonableness of Christianity. Wesley made his appeal primarily to the reason and to the conscience, not to the emotions directly. His sermons were directed to "men of reason" and "common sense". The claim to the reasonable by Evangelicalism was an important as its warmer faith to Cowper. Cowper is quite willing to defend Evangelical Christianity in traditional rationalistic ways, but he goes further to insist that truth must be experienced, must be felt, to be of any effect in the character of man.

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[29] Mary Alice Tenney, "Early Methodist Autobiography" (1937), p. 221.

Though the leaders of the Revival emphasised reason, they used the emotions as a motivating force to produce moral decision and action. It was from the "heart" that the issues of life were to come. Therefore, any effective message must speak to the heart.

The appeal was made to the practical rather than the pure or theoretical reason. The Evangelicals spoke to the "common sense" of the age, not to reason used to argue metaphysical and theological issues. Moral renewal was, therefore, closely allied to Evangelical conversion. The "new birth" was a moral change, not an assent to a particular set of dogmas. As John Wesley pointed out in his sermon, "The Almost Christian" (preached at Great St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University July 25, 1741), being a Christian meant more than intellectual assent and conventional religious observance.[30] Most people, though orthodox in theology, lived their lives "without God in the world"; Wesley called the conventional Christian a "practical atheist". The something more required than morality and faithful religious observance was a keen and lively faith, a conversion from the old to the new as dramatic as being born over again.

The first step in the usual Evangelical conversion was an intellectual awakening in which the individual becomes aware of his spiritual need, and acknowledges the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death to secure salvation from his sins. The second step was a moral conversion in which the sinner is heartily sorry for his sins and tries to do good.

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[30]John Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions (1944), pp. 11-19.

He confesses his sins and strives to make restitution for them. To those he has defrauded, he confesses his guilt and makes right his offence. Awareness of sin and hearty repentance, however, make one only an an "almost" Christian.

The third step was a mystical experience of God in which the individual, by faith, receives the "assurance" that his sins are forgiven and by the "witness of the Spirit" to his spirit that he is now a "child of God". Wesley's note to Hebrews vi. II, is the best short statemtn of assurance.

> The full assurance of faith relates to present pardon; the full assurance of hope to future glory. The former is the highest degree of divine evidence that God is reconciled to me in the Son of His love; the latter is the same degree of divine evidence (wrought in the soul by the same immediate inspiration of the Holy Ghost) of persevering grace, and of eternal glory....But the assurance of faith and hope is not an opinion, not a bare construction of Scripture, but is given immediately by the power of the Holy Ghost; and what none can have for another, but for himself only.[31]

Assurance is a direct personal encounter with the divine in which the sinner knows his sins are forgiven and that he is reconciled to God. It is an authentication of divine reality more personal and stronger than any exterior evidence in nature or the most closely reasoned argument for his existence. It was seen as a meeting with the living God after the pattern of St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. This experience was followed by a sense of great joy and peace, a desire to win others to Christ and frequently a new appreciation for the beauties of nature.

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[31]John Wesley, Explanatory Notes on the New Testament (1955), p. 595.

To his personal assurance the convert testifies to others and often tells them of the trials and struggles he went through to find God. The doctrine of assurance was the source of much criticism against the Evangelicals and smacked of presumption to other Christians.[32]

Cowper's conversion follows the conventional pattern. He had continued in a state of depression for some months at St. Albans, but a slow and gradual improvement was noticeable. During a visit from his brother, he was greatly encouraged and the cloud of depression lifted. Gradually he found the faith to apply the Gospel message to his own case.

> Within a few days of my first arrival at St. Albans, I had thrown aside the word of God, as a book in which I had no longer any interest or portion. The only instance, in which I can recollect reading a single chapter, was about two months before my recovery. Having found a Bible on the bench in the garden, I opened upon the 11th of St. John, where Lazarus is raised from the dead; and saw as much benevolence, mercy, goodness, and sympathy with miserable man, in our Saviour's conduct, that I almost shed tears even after the revelation; little thinking that it was an exact type of the mercy which Jesus was on the point of extending towards myself. I sighed, and said, "Oh, that I had not rejected so good a Redeemer, that I had not forfeited all his favours!" Thus was my heart softened, though not yet enlightened. I closed the book, without intending to open it again.
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> Having risen with somewhat of a more cheerful feeling, I repaired to my room, where breakfast waited for me. While I sat at table, I found the cloud of horror, which had so long hung over me, was every moment passing away; and every moment came fraught with hope. I was continually more and more persuaded, that I was not utterly doomed to destruction. The way of salvation was still, however, hid from my eyes; nor did I see it at all clearer than before my illness. I only thought, that if it pleased God to spare me, I would lead a better life; and that I would yet escape hell, if a religious observance of my duty would secure from it.

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32 Sidney G. Dimond, The Psychology of the Methodist Revival (1926), p. 231.

Thus may the terror of the Lord make a Pharisee; but only the sweet voice of mercy in the gospel can make a Christian.

But the happy period which was to shake off my fetters, and afford me a clear opening of the free mercy of God in Christ Jesus was now arrived. I flung myself into a chair near the window, and seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction. The first verse I saw, was the 25th of the 3rd of Romans: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God."

Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Son of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement....In a moment I believed, and received the Gospel. Whatever my friend Madan had said to me long before, revived in all its clearness, with the demonstration of the Spirit and with power. Unless the Almighty arm had been under me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears, and my voice choked with transport. I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder. But the work of the Holy Spirit is best described in his own words, it is "joy unspeakable and full of glory." Thus was my heavenly Father in Christ Jesus pleased to give me the full assurance of faith, and out of a strong, stony, unbelieving heart, to raise up a child unto Abraham. How glad should I now have been to have spent every moment in prayer and thanksgiving!

I lost no opportunity of repairing to a throne of grace; but flew to it with an earnestness irresistible and never to be satisfied. Could I help it? Could I do otherwise than love and rejoice in my reconciled Father in Christ Jesus? The Lord had enlarged my heart, and I ran in the way of his commandments. For many succeeding weeks, tears were ready to flow, if I did but speak of the gospel, or mention the name of Jesus. To rejoice day and night was all my employment. Too happy to sleep much, I thought it but lost time that was spent in slumber. Oh that the ardour of my first love had continued! But I have known many a lifeless and unhallowed hour since; long intervals of darkness, interrupted by short returns of peace and joy in believing.

My physician, ever watchful and apprehensive for my welfare, was now alarmed, lest the sudden transition from despair to joy, should terminate in a fatal frenzy. But "the Lord was my strength and my song, and was become my salvation." I said, "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord; he has chastened me sore, but not given me over unto death. O give thanks unto the Lord, for his mercy endureth for ever."

In a short time, Dr. Cotton became satisfied, and acquiesced in the soundness of my cure; and much sweet communion I had with him, concerning the things of our salvation.[33]

The usual steps to conversion are clearly outlined and the resulting experience can be paralleled in many other accounts of conversion from the period. The language of his narration is heavily biblical, amounting to a jargon characteristic of the Evangelicals, and a number of the phrases appear later as titles to and lines in his hymns. Particularly notable is the role played by the Bible in his conversion and the authority it has for him.

The basis for Evangelical theology was the Bible as interpreted by John Calvin. But, as Cowper said in giving advice to Johnny Johnson on what to read in preparation for the Church:

> Let your divinity, if I may advise, be the divinity of the glorious Reformation: I mean in contradistinction to Arminianism [the theology of Wesley], and all the isms that were ever broached in this world of error and ignorance.
>
> The divinity of the Reformation is called Calvinism, but injuriously. It has been that of the Church of Christ in all ages. It is the divinity of St. Paul, and of St. Paul's Master, Who met him in his way to Damascus.[34]

But it would be wrong to suggest that the Evangelicals were theologically oriented except in a thoroughly non-specialized sense. Theology for them was not a science attempting to explore and answer intellectual and metaphysical questions about God; it was always practical and applied.

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[33] Memoir, pp. 65-70. [34] Letters, III, p. 464.

The questions they considered most important were not theoretical - and they could tolerate a fair amount of variation even on a doctrine as fundamental as the trinity - but the central personal ones of how to gain salvation and to live the Christian life. Cowper said that he had been an active student of the evidences which externally supported traditional Christian doctrines as opposed to Deism, but his primary concern even in his pre-Evangelical days was practical. "I think I once went so far into a controversy of this kind, as to assert, that I would gladly submit to have my right hand cut off, so that I might but be enabled to live according to the gospel."[35] Evangelicals turned not to nature so much for "evidences" of God at work in the world as to their own hearts and lives. They sought for empirical verification of God's love in their own election by his grace.

Two aspects of Evangelicalism deserve closer attention because of their importance to Cowper's poetry, the Evangelical attitude toward nature and their use of the Bible.

Evangelical Naturalism and the Bible

The Evangelicals shared with the Deists the excitement created by the new discoveries in the natural sciences, but they sharply differed with them over the precise relationship of nature to God. In contrast to Deism's absentee God, the Evangelicals saw nature as a continuous miracle, held in being each moment by the unsleeping

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[35] *Memoir*, pp. 37-38.

care of one who notes the sparrow's fall. As Cowper says in The Task,

> All we behold is miracle; but, seen
> So duly,, all is miracle in vain.
> (VI, 132-133)

Nature's obedient response to the Creator became for the Evangelical an analogy for the Evangelicals as to how the Christian should respond to the Creator. As God watches over and cares for his creatures, so he loves and directs the lives of men. As nature responds with joy and simple dependence upon the Creator, so the Christian should accept unquestioningly the mysterious providence of God in his life.

In Reform theology, Jesus Christ as the Son of God is seen as the supreme and unique revelation of God to man; as Son of Man he is also the perfect pattern of obedient response to the Father. Nature, although it "declares" the glory of God, can never reveal him. The biblical reference used most commonly in such discussions was Psalm xix. 1-2: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge". (The Hebrew word translated as "declare" is saphar, meaning "to recount".[36]) This special understanding of nature, however, was not open to the unconverted. It is a "secret analogy", as John Newton described it, to which the Bible and an enlightened heart are the keys.

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[36]Robert Young, Analytical Concordance to the Bible, (New York: Funk & Wagnall's Company, 1955).

By going out into nature with enlightened eyes, the Evangelical Christian could join in the chorus of continuous praise which creation ceaselessly expresses to the glory of God. Next to the joys of Christian worship, communing with God in nature could be the greatest of pleasures. This Cowper found to be true while at Huntingdon. Depressed after his brother John had left him alone in Huntingdon, he walked out from the town into the fields.

> I walked forth, towards the close of the day, in this melancholy frame of mind, and having wandered about a mile from the town, I found my heart, at length, so powerfully drawn towards the Lord, that having gained a retired and secret nook in the corner of a field, I kneeled down under a bank, and poured forth my complaints before him.[37]

The following day, Sunday, he attended church for the first time since his recovery. Throughout the service he was ecstatic, and following it, he again returned to his nook in the fields.

> I went immediately after church to the place where I had prayed the day before, and found the relief I had there received was but the earnest of a richer blessing. How shall I express what the Lord did for me, except by saying, that he made all his goodness to pass before me. I seemed to speak with him face to face, as a man conversing with his friend, except that my speech was only in tears of joy, and groanings which cannot be uttered. I could say, indeed, with Jacob, not "how dreadful," but how lovely, "is this place! This is none other than the house of God."[38]

At this stage of life, nature was largely the context of his devotion to God. Later at Olney, stimulated perhaps by Newton's enthusiasm, nature becomes more consciously a stimulant to praise.

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[37] Memoir, p. 75. [38] Ibid., pp. 77-78.

Even at Huntingdon, however, he can call a place in nature "the house of God" where all things remind him of his Maker and join in his praise to God.

Though nature reminds the Christian of God, and declares his goodness and joins with man in praise, it does not reveal God. Revelation is always biblical and personal to the Evangelical, and only by reading Holy Scripture can one see the glory of God in nature. The Bible, therefore, is the only adequate and necessary revelation of God, the very "word of God" itself.

The Evangelicals were centrally orthodox in their belief that the Bible was the literal words of God. Luther described the Bible as the cradle which holds the Christ, and the whole Church, Roman and Reformed, accepted its verbal inspiration and inerrancy. Both used various (means) methods of interpretation to "clarify" and explain difficult passages. The Evangelicals, however, went further and found in the words of the Bible a miraculous even talismanic quality.

It is now difficult to recapture the confidence in the effective power of the biblical language which the Evangelicals felt. From the Gospels themselves they learned something of its spiritual strength; Jesus repulsed the temptations of the Devil by quoting Scripture at him. The Evangelicals also found it helpful in non-religious contexts. Guidance for life and even particular non-religious decisions could be made by recourse to a quite mechanical and superstitious use of the Bible.

More important, the words of God were the chosen and elect medium through which God's effective call came to men, either through the preaching of the word from the pulpit or in the quietness of a rural retreat where the sinner sought release from guilt in reading the Bible and in prayer.

In sharing the Gospel message, no better medium could be found than a heavy reliance upon the powerful words themselves. This resulted in the wrenching of biblical metaphors from their contexts and the development of an unpleasant, biblical jargon which was used mechanically and with little sensitivity to the less desirable images created. At its best, it could result in the noble plainness encouraged by Augustan practice.

The words "dictated by the Holy Spirit", therefore, became a potent source to Cowper for the diction of his poetry. The plain language and stylistic qualities of the Gospel narrators became for him the chief literary goal to be sought. As He wrote to Lady Hesketh (August 1, 1765),

> 'He that believeth on me is passed from death unto life,' though it be as plain a sentence as words can form, has more beauties in it for such a person than all the labours antiquity can boast of.[39]

It was holy truth carried to the heart of man in holy language.

Holy though it was, its sanctity did not reserve it from common use. As the classics of Greece and Rome were the models for heroic poetry and satire which conveyed secular truth, so scriptural language was better suited than any other to bear the gospel forcefully into the heart and transforms the life of man.

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[39] Letters, I, p. 38.

Cowper's faithfulness to Augustan standards complements and supports his use of biblical language. Underlying his selection of "scriptural language" for his poetry is the belief that the content should control the style, the neo-classical concept of propriety. His choice of a plain style was also determined by considerations of sudience. Cowper was writing for a much wider and different reading public than Pope's, one more middle class and less appreciative of the ornaments of poetry. As Cowper indicates, he is willing, like St. Paul before him, to make as many concessions in manners or style as necessary to win and hold his audience. He sugars his pills, but refuses to adulterate or weaken the dosage. Cowper, as a new convert to biblical Christianity, turned to the one great text-book, and as never before, read, pondered, and absorbed the Authorized Version. In his daily attendance at worship, he listened often almost in ecstasy to the lessons. At Olney, he heard Newton and other Evangelicals preach biblical sermons, and at the Great House he listened to further expositions of selected portions of the Bible. In family prayers he heard again the magical words, and in the privacy of his own room, he rubbed the holy, inspired words till they shined. His Memoir and letters abundantly show the effects of this constant immersion in the words of the Bible. Like other Evangelicals, he was overwhelmingly a man of one book.

Cowper seems to have been especially attracted to the Old Testament. The sweep and breadth of its events, the epic size of its heroes, and the eternal importance of its actions were interpreted in terms applicable to himself. Here too was a land, a people, who differed sharply and exotically from the placid and flat countryside of Olney. The Hebrew place names and phrases sounded richly in his ears: "Jehovah-Jireh, The Lord Will Provide"; "Jehovah-Rophi, I Am the Lord that Healeth"; "Jehovah-Nissi, The Lord My Banner"; "Jehovah-Shalom, The Lord Send Peace"; "Jehovah-Shammah, The Lord is There"; and "Jehovah-Jesus".

There was a colour and life about them which the English translation lacked, and it is notable that he used them so often for the names of his hymns on Old Testaments texts. But always, the Old Testament is made to look forward to the New, the old ritual to its stark fulfilment in Christ suffering and dying on a cross outside Jerusalem.

The Reformed tradition has seen the Bible as a unit with its heart and centre in the New Testament Gospel; the Bible was about Christ. The Old Testament was to be understood and interpreted, therefore, in terms of the New. Cowper is perfectly correct as an Evangelical in reading the Old Testament typologically; the Old Testament contains the Gospel under types and shadows.[40] Cowper's manner and method are most clearly seen in "Old-Testament Gospel".

> Israel in ancient days,
> Not only had a view
> Of Sinai in a blaze,
> But learn'd the gospel too:
> The types and figures were a glass
> In which they saw the Saviour's face.

Every incident and detail of the Old Testament was not equally helpful in setting forth the Gospel, however. Certain "types and figures" clearly indicated the way in which God would reveal himself in Jesus Christ. During the Exodus, God had told the Children of Israel to slay a pure, spotless lamb, the flesh of which they were to eat and the blood of which was to be placed on their doors.

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[40] "He was the lamb who verily was fore-ordained before the foundation of the world, who was slain in type from the foundation of the world, and who in the fulness of time appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."
William Romaine, Psalmody (1775), pp. 35-36.

If they obeyed, the death angel sent to slay all the first-born males in Egypt would pass over them. ("And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt." Exodus xii. 13.)

> The paschal sacrifice,
> The blood-besprinkled door,
> Seen with enlighten'd eyes,
> And once apply'd with pow'r;
> Would teach the need of other blood,
> To reconcile an angry God.

From the book of Leviticus, the book outlining the liturgical and ritual observances imposed, the Evangelicals could see God teaching his people, preparing them for his coming, so that in that day of fulfilment, they might understand. Three Levitical regulations were particularly revealing in character: (1) For cleansing after child-birth, the mother was to bring a lamb and a dove for sacrifice to the temple.

> And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon, or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest: who shall offer it before the Lord, and make an atonement. (Leviticus xii. 6.)

> The Lamb, the Dove, set forth
> His perfect innocence,
> Whose blood, of matchless worth,
> Should be the soul's defence:
> For he who can for sin atone,
> Must have no failings of his own.

(2) "And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the inquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon

the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness" (Leviticus xvi. 21).

The scape-goat on his head
The people's trespass bore,
And to the desert led,
Was to be seen no more:
In him, our Surety seem'd to say,
"Behold, I bear your sins away."

(3) For the cleansing of a house in which leprosy has been found, the priest was ordered to have it thoroughly cleaned, even to the replacing of stones on which the leprous mold had attached itself. Once the practical cleansing was demonstrably effective, then a ceremonial cleansing followed in which two birds were taken, one killed over running water and the second bird dipped in its blood and the water. The house was then to be cleansed with the blood, the water, and the living bird, after which the living bird was let free outside the city (Leviticus xiv. 51-53).

Dipt in his fellow's blood,
The living bird went free,
The type, well understood,
Express'd the sinner's plea;
Describ'd a guilty soul enlarg'd,
And by a Saviour's death discharg'd.

Cowper concludes most appropriately,

Jesus, I love to trace
Throughout the sacred page
The footsteps of thy grace,
The same in ev'ry age!
Oh grant that I may faithful be
To clearer light, vouchsaf'd to me!

The Old Testament, therefore, tells of Christ almost as clearly as the New. Cowper and the Evangelicals saw Sinai burning with the presence of God, and through that blaze could recognize the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

As John Newton says in his sermon, "On Searching the Scriptures," "Thus the Old and New Testament do mutually illustrate each other; nor can either be well understood singly. The Old Testament, in histories, types, prophecies, and ceremonies, strongly delineates him, who, in the fullness of time, was to come into the world to effect a reconciliation between God and man."[41] St. Paul had described the law of Moses, given at Sinai, as a (happy) schoolmaster leading us to Christ (Galatians iii. 24), and for precedent, he had the words of Christ: "These are the words, which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms concerning me. Then opened he their understandings that they might understand the scriptures". (Luke xxiv. 44-45). With such authority, Newton did not hesitate to read the Gospel in the Old Testament.

> ... it may be proved beyond contradiction, that in these the gospel was preached of old to all those Israelities indeed, whose hearts were right with God, and whose understandings were enlightened by his Spirit. The ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat, the tabernacle, the incense, the altar, the offerings, the high-priest with his ornaments and garments, the laws relating to the leprosy, the Nazarite, and the redemption of lands;-- all these, and many more, ...have a deep and important meaning beyond their outward appearance; each, in their place, pointed to the Lamb of God who was to take away the sins of the world (John i.), derived their efficacy from him, and received their full accomplishment in him.[42]

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[41] John Newton, Works (London, 1837), Vol. 1, p. 336. [42] John Newton, Sermon V, "On Searching the Scriptures, "Works (1837), Vol. 1, p. 336.

There are three things, as Newton saw it, in the Old Testament which particularly revealed Christ; prophecies, types, and ceremonies. Almost every one of the Old Testament types and ceremonies Newton mentions above appear in Cowper's hymns; and in the moral satires and The Task, he uses biblical prophecies.

The Evangelicals found confirmed in nature what they had learned from Holy Scripture, and they drew on the Bible, especially the Psalms, for the language to describe the world around them. The Bible also enriched their imaginations. Therein they found the rare and exotic, heroic men and actions, tender love stories, melodramatic tales of passion, murder and mystery. The stage was cosmic and the chief performer was God himself. Nor was their God the abstract universal principle of the Deist; he was Jehovah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he who framed the world, spoke through his prephets, chastened his people with love and punished his enemies with vengeance. Their Christ was not the pale Galilean, but a rough simple man like themselves, yet God, nailed to a crude cross, clothed in crimson blood.

The Bible was more, however, than a stimulus to the imagination. The Evangelicals tried to live according to the Bible. With the Puritans before them, they saw Holy Scripture as the sole and sufficient rule for life and doctrine. In this as well, Cowper was an Evangelical.

Cowper's Pattern of Life

Following his conversion, Cowper lived the life of an active Evangelical both at Huntingdon and at Olney. Soon after his arrival at Huntingdon, he began to attend services of worship daily, prayed much in private, read heavily in Evangelical writers, devoured the

Bible and wrote letters calling his conventionally religious friends and relatives to a more Evangelical faith. His letters to Harriet Cowper, now Lady Hesketh, are somewhat presumptious and must have made her wonder how fully recovered her cousin was.[43] He found sympathetic companionship and support from Mary Unwin, the wife of the minister, and his son, William Unwin. Though Mr. Unwin, twenty years older than his wife, was no Evangelical, Cowper's relationship to him must have been at least cordial. Not long after going to Huntingdon, he took lodgings with the Unwin family, and found in Mary the mother he had lost as a six year old boy. Following the death of Mr. Unwin, Cowper continued in the home as a father and a companion to the family.

Unhappy, however, both with the lack of sound preaching in Huntingdon and the unpleasant whispers spread by those who questioned the propriety of his staying on with Mrs. Unwin, only seven years his senior, Cowper and Mary began searching for a more congenial environment in which to live. With Mary and her son, Cowper was less dependent on his brother John, who must have found his Evangelical brother somewhat a source of embarrassment. After consulting with a number of other Evangelicals, they moved to Olney where John Newton was the minister of St. Peter's Church, a man of strong character and doctrine who was to shepherd them through the next twenty years.

The pattern of worship and innocent diversion established by Cowper at Huntingdon was to continue at Olney.

> We breakfast commonly between eight and nine; till eleven, we read either the Scripture, or the sermons of some faithful

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[43] See Letter, I, pp. 28-31, for example.

> preacher of those holy mysteries; at eleven we attend divine service, which is performed here twice every day; and from twelve to three we separate and amuse ourselves as we please. During that interval I either read in my own apartment, or walk, or ride, or work in the garden. We seldom sit an hour after dinner, but if the weather permits, adjourn to the garden, where with Mrs. Unwin and her son I have generally the pleasure of religious conversation till tea-time. If it rains, or is too windy for walking, we either converse within doors, or sing some hymns of Martin's /Madan/ collection, and by the help of Mrs. Unwin's harpsichord make up a tolerable concert, in which our hearts, I hope are the best and most musical performers. After tea we sally forth to walk in good earnest. Mrs. Unwin is a good walker, and we have generally travelled about four miles before we see home again. When the days are short, we make this excursion in the former part of the day, between Church-time and supper, and commonly finish the evening either with hymns or a sermon; and last of allthe family are called to prayers. I need not tell <u>you</u>, that such a life as this is consistent with the utmost cheerfulness; accordingly we are all happy, and dwell together in unity as brethern. Mrs. Unwin has almost a maternal affection for me, and I have something like a filial one for her, and her son and I are brothers. Blessed be the God of our salvation for such companions, and for such a life; above all, for a heart to like it.[44]

From the very first, Cowper used nature as the context for his devptions. Out of doors, he was freed from domestic distractions and in the countryside he was away from the sounds of men. Here alone with God, worship seemed especially appropriate and easy. At Olney, his love of nature was to develop more fully with his own garden, pets, and daily walks with Mary. Nature was useful for the Christian life both as a context for the spiritual life and as a school room in which so many teachers taught of God.

His reading was also large. At Huntingdon, he had limited himself to the Bible and the standard texts of Evangelicalism. At Olney, especially after 1774, his interests broadened and he became eager for the news of a larger more active world than Olney. Newspapers and the

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[44]Letters, I, pp. 80-81.

monthlies brought news of the progress of the war in America and the new discoveries by British sailors and scientists. During the time he was writing The Task, he was also reading travels. In December 1781, he joined a circulating library. Judging from the number of books mentioned in his letters, Cowper followed a carefully disciplined pattern for his life, but read rather indiscriminately, following his enthusiasms wherever they led him. ¶ When a move from Huntingdon became desirable, Olney was one of the few places which proved attractive to him. London, "the scene of my former abominations", he wished to see no more.[45] It had been the scene of his failure and there were few old friends there who would have accepted and understood his conversion to Evangelicalism. He now sought only peace and quietness and the enabling power of his new faith. Olney appeared to offer all he desired; a snug home presided over by Mary Unwin, sound Evangelical preaching by John Newton and a rural retirement in a pleasant countryside. He described it once as a place "abounding with Palm trees and Wells of living water",[46] but there were many other times, especially in the winter months, when he felt trapped and found the people and the place both cold and mean. In early March, 1780, he wrote to Mrs. Newton, now in London,

> If I were in a condition to leave Olney, too, I certainly would not stay in it. It is no attachment to the place that binds me here, but an unfitness for every other. I lived in it once, but now I am buried in it, and have no business with the world on the outside of my sepulchre; my appearance would startle them, and theirs would be shocking to me.[47]

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[45] Memoir, p. 71.

[46] Uncollected and Unpublished Letters, 5-6, 8, 11. See Ryskamp, p. 170.

[47] Letters, I, p. 175.

When summer returned, however, his spirits rose and his passion for life the life of retirement increased, though he compared Olney to the Bastille in July, 1783.[48]

Cowper's Evangelicalism, unlike Newton's and Wesley's, was a retreat from the world rather than a living challenge to it. The pattern of life which he describes in his letter to Mrs. Cowper presents a distortion of the Evangelical ideal. Cowper is here seen as the spiritual epicure largely unconcerned with people and the world around him. He attempts to find happiness not only by excluding the evil and vicious, but also by denying himself much which is innocent and virtuous. Cowper reduces the number of his desires in the hope of finding compensation in the cultivation of his own spiritual garden. Lacking is the world vision characteristic of both Newton and Wesley.

Further, to lead such a life, one must have an independent income and be satisfied with a severely restricted range of interests. Cowper, however, had no income. Out of religious scruple, he had resigned his post as Commissioner of Bankrupts which had provided him a small but dependable stipend.[49] He also had two dependents whom he had brought with him from St. Albans. He had become, in fact, totally dependent upon the generosity of his relatives and friends.

The confidence he professes was both unreal and short lived.

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48 Letters, II, p. 85

49 Memoir, p. 71

By 1773, the pattern of stress had again accumulated to the point where a collapse was inevitable. In March of 1770, his brother John had died, but during his last days he brought joy to William by becoming an Evangelical convert.[50] Before, when John had come visiting to Olney, Cowper would not let him take family prayers if Newton were present, nor was he ever offered the pulpit at Olney.[51] His death-bed conversion at least gave support to Cowper's assurance that Evangelical doctrines were sound. The period following his brother's death was one of increasing depression. Further pressures were again being applied for the marriage of Cowper and Mary Unwin. The emotional identification of Mary with his mother, which Cowper may have found necessary to justify his continuing presence in the family, would have made the change of roles to that of lover an impossible one psychologically.[52]

On the 24th of January 1773, Cowper suffered another derangement, similar to his earlier collapse in London. He again attempted suicide. Near the end of February, he had a dreadful dream in which he believed God spoke, saying, "It is all over with thee, thou has perished."[53] Suffering from the delusion that Mrs. Unwin wished to poison him, he fled from Orchard Side to shelter at the Vicarage with Newton for over a year.

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50 Letters, I, pp. 118-120.

51 William Cowper, Adelphi, p. 9.

52 I am indebted to the late Rev. Professor J.G. Mackenzie for my interpretation of Cowper's mental illness. See also,

53 Letters, I, p. 132

Newton did all he could for his friend. In the summer, he went to St. Albans to consult with Dr. Cotton. He was bled according to Cotton's instructions and given medicines. Newton's letters to John Thornton during the year give a clear picture of careful concern and an application of all available means towards Cowper's recovery.[54] The strain must have been great indeed. To find some rest, since Cowper appeared better, the Newtons left for a brief holiday in Warwickshire. They were hardly away before they were recalled. Newton wrote to Thornton (11th April 1774), "But after what happened to dear Mr. Cowper while we were in Warwickshire, we have made it a point not to be both from home long together without absolute necessity while his distress continues." The following year, after Cowper had returned to Orchard Side quite as abruptly as he had left, Newton wrote Thornton (1st June 1775), "It has pleased the Lord by what I have seen and suffered to teach one how to sympathize with those who are afflicted with nervous disorders, and with those who are nearly related to them and constantly with them."

From all evidence, published and unpublished, Newton appears muchmaligned by Cowper's biographers. He was strong man about whom even in his life-time people appear to have taken sides. He was accused of preaching people mad at Olney (apparently a reference to Cowper), and certainly he had had his conflicts with the local people. "The death of many, the defection of man, the increase of sin, and

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54 Letters of John Newton to John Thornton. Unpublished. Used with the permission of John Thornton of Southbourne.

other circumstances," he wrote to Thornton (23rd January, 1777), led him to consider leaving Olney. After a return visit to Olney in August, 1783, he wrote again to Thornton (8th September, 1783):

> I was cordially received at Olney--the heats and animosities which prevailed when I was there last, seem in good measure subsided. There are however many who have left the Church, and hear among the Dissenters, but I hope they have not left the Lord.

Thomas Scott, who followed Newton, was more of a scholar and of a higher social class than the people of the Church. Newton had been one of them.

> The best of the Olney people are afflicted people and I have been through great inward conflicts and spiritual distresses, and for want of some experience of the like kind, he [Scott] cannot so well hit their cases, nor sympathize with them so sincerely as might be wished.

Before leaving for St. Mary, Woolnoth, London, Newton carefully introduced William Bull to Cowper as a sympathetic friend near at hand. It was Newton also who encouraged Cowper to write poetry, both the Hymns and the satires, and secured a publisher for them.

Following the derangement of 1773-74, Cowper's pattern of retreat and reduction continued. Now considering himself among the damned, he denied himself the consolations of religion. But a detailed examination of his reading during these years reveals his rediscovery of the outside world. His reading no longer included theological treatises. He discovers books of voyages and accounts of new ventures in science. To replace the consolations of religion, he depends almost entirely on the quiet pleasures of domestic tranquility: his pets, his garden, walks through the countryside and his companionship with Mary Unwin.

From this new compromise with life, he gained the confidence to write poetry for his "amusement" and for the good of those who

read it. Although he considered himself no longer included within the covenant of grace, he became the poet laureate of Evangelicalism. With the exception of his translation of Homer and Horace, all of his major poems show the clear imprint of his Evangelical views.

His delusion that he was elected to eternal damnation had no effect upon his adherence to Evangelical doctrines. His delusionary system was not the product of his Calvinism, though the terminology in which it was expressed is drawn from it. With the passage of years and the self-confidence he gained from the success of his poetry, Cowper's views were mellowed rather than modified. He became less rigid in relation to people and more tolerant of behaviour which he could not approve. He may have been the stricken deer that left the herd, but he was just as eager, when it seemed possible, to be accepted back again with honour and reputation, though always at a distance.

But Cowper was much more than an Evangelical poet. He was a man of quiet and gentlemanly bearing. He had the personality of a recluse. Forced into retirement by his mental illness, he was nonetheless an excellent campanion and devoted friend to a small group of people. Through his poetry he rediscovered the friends of his youth and made friends with an increasing circle of well-wishers.

His friendship with John Newton provided authority and strength which may have been too exacting at times, but he was always a masculine friend upon whom he could depend in times of trouble. In Mary Unwin, he found a mother to live with him. The extent of her

direct influence upon his writing can only be speculated. Cowper called her his "lady chamberlain", but she appears primarily to have been the one to whom he read his poetry while in the process of composition. There is no reason to believe that she increased the Evangelical character of any of his poems. The friendship with Lady Austen was to crown the last five and most productive years of Cowper's life at Olney. Her Evangelicalism, which had a gaiety and frolic about it, refreshed him and contributed to his increasing self confidence. To her we owe both "John Gilpin" and The Task.

Cowper had found in Evangelicalism, however, a stable orthodoxy which he could trust and which met his most basic emotional and intellectual needs. He found in it a faith which was traditional, reasonable and warm-heared. It provided an additional place of withdrawal from a threatening world. Its orthodoxy was reassuring and its enthusiasm gave him hope. Instantaneous conversions and miraculous interventions are particularly desired by those who lack confidence in their own power to cope with the world. Evangelicalism supplied this need for dependence on a power greater than himself which the more fashionable Deisim did not recognize. Deisim was a faith for those who could participate in the increasing control men felt they had gained over nature. But for Cowper, its liberal, sceptical humanism was denied by all his experiences with life.

In his textbook, the Bible, he found a body of myth which was to undergird his poetry and his way of describing nature;

and in its Psalms and prophets, he found a literature of authority, truth and beauty. It gave him a new awareness and pleasure in nature. And among its adherents he found engaging and solid friendships.

Evangelicalism provided him with a superficially rational system which described and explained the experiences of his strange and difficult life. It gave him a normative moral standard against which he was to measure and condemn his society. It supplied him with a message and the language with special authority to express it; and, in forcing him to justify his own life, it encouraged him to write prophetic poetry. Only in the 1780's, when he had achieved notice and acclaim, was he able to loosen his hysterical grip upon its more narrow interpretations of the Christian faith. By then Evangelicalism had taught him to sing.

CHAPTER III

SINAI IN A BLAZE: THE OLNEY HYMNS

The types and figures were a glass
In which they saw the Saviour's face.

The most attractive aspect of Evangelical life and worship was undoubtedly the singing of hymns. The Evangelicals too often frowned on social activities which were, in our eyes at least, morally indifferent; but what they lost by their abstention from "vain amusements",[1] they made up for by an active participation in what they thought more creative forms of recreation: gardening, walks in the countryside, caring for the poor and sick, religious conversation and hymn-singing. From a glance at the daily and weekly schedule of Cowper and Newton, the central place given to hymns is impressive.

Cowper, in writing hymns, chose that form of poetry most closely tied to the language of the Bible and to the plainness and simplicity demanded by an often semi-literate audience. The form he inherited had been developed during the preceding two centuries through the writing and use of metrical paraphrases of the Psalms in Reformed worship to hymns written in "Scriptural lan-

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[1] William Cowper, "The Vanity of the World", Olney Hymns (Book I. lv.), The Poetical Works of William Cowper (1950), p. 437, ll. 9-12:

> The Joy that vain amusements give,
> Oh! sad conclusion that it brings!
> The honey of a crowded hive,
> Defended by a thousand stings.

guage". Strict adherence to the words of Holy Scripture in the services of the Church inhibited the introduction of hymns until Isaac Watts "Christianised" the Psalms and published his Hymns and Spiritual Songs (1707). The desire for the participation of all the people also forced a musical and literary simplicity upon the hymn which made it more a form of functional verse rather than a religious lyric. Working within these rather rigid limits, Cowper wrote a few hymns of lasting value.

Early Hymns and Metrical Psalms

Hymn-singing has appeared repeatedly in the history of the Christian Church, especially at times of religious awakening. At first the Early Church, following the pattern set by Jewish worship, continued to sing the Psalms. The New Testament frequently refers to the singing of "psalms and hymns".[2] Before the eighteenth century, "hymns" was thought to refer to those biblical passages, including the Psalms, which were traditionally sung as part of Hebrew and early Christian worship, i.e. the Song of Deborah, Moses' Song of Deliverance, the Magnificat and the Nunc Dimittis.[3] However, quite early in the Church, extra-biblical songs began to appear, at first in Greece, and soon throughout the West. By the fourth century, the singing of such hymns had become wide spread. St. Jerome (340?-420) says of it: "One cannot go into the fields without hearing the plower at his

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[2]Matthew xxvi. 30, Colossians iii. 16, Ephesians v. 19.

[3]Judges v., Exodus xv. 1-17, Luke i. 46-55, Luke ii. 29-32.

hallelujahs, and the mower at his hymns."[4] From his commentary on Psalm 148, we are indebted to St. Augustine (354-430) for one of the earliest definitions of the hymn.

> Know ye what an hymn is? It is a song with praise to God. If thou praisest God and singest not, thou utterest no hymn; if thou singest aught else, which pertaineth not to the praise of God, although thou singest and praisest, thou utterest no hymn. An hymn containeth these three things, song, and praise, and that of God. Praise then of God is called an hymn.[5]

Medieval hymnody reached full development in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; but as it increased in splendour, the Latin hymns were sung less by the common people and were used primarily by the clergy in the services of the Church.

At the Reformation, two major changes occurred in hymnody. First, the singing of hymns was returned to the people. To make this possible, the Lutheran hymns were written in German, the language of the people, and the diction was adjusted to the lowest capacity. Luther, in a letter to George Spalatin (1524), advised him in writing hymns to

> ...leave out all new words and words that are only used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and commonest words should be sung, but they should also be pure and apt and give clear sense, as near as possible to that of the Psalter.[6]

A statement requesting the same conscious care to meet the needs of the common people, the ommission of the unfamiliar or poetic word, and the use of the Psalms as the model recurs in the preface

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[4]Jeremiah Bascom Reeves, The Hymn as Literature (New York, 1924), p. 80.

[5]John Julian (ed.), A Dictionary of Hymnology (London, 1908), p. 640.

[6]Lily B. Campbell, Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 29-30. Cf. Martin Luther, The Letters of Martin Luther (London, 1908), p. 131.

to almost every book of hymns in the eighteenth century, including that of the Olney Hymns. There continues as well the respectful attempt to keep the language scriptural or as close to the Bible as possible.

Secondly, the rediscovery of the Bible at the time of the Reformation and the seriousness with which the Reformed churches took its authority (the whole Church - Roman, Lutheran and Reformed - accepted its divine inspiration)[7], not surprisingly led the Reformed and Anglican liturgies to the use of the Psalter rather than extra-biblical hymns.[7] Calvin had seen and was well pleased with the verse translation of the Psalms made by Marot, a poet of the French court; and since Calvin, the singing of the Psalms has had an important place in Lutheran and Reformed worship. According to Coverdale, Marot had hoped to reform the court and the common people through the singing of Psalms. His method was two-fold; the people could thereby learn true doctrine, and they might be freed from the singing of loose and bawdy ballads.

> Yea, would God that our Minstrels had no other thing to play upon, neither our carters and plowmen other things to whistle upon, save psalms, hymns, and other godly songs such as David is occupied withal! And if women, sitting at their rocks or spinning at their wheels had none other songs to pass their time withal, than such as Moses's sister, Glenhanna's wife; Deborah, and Mary, mother of Christ have sung before them they would be

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[7] Cf. William Romaine, Psalmody (1775), p. 10:
The Psalms are the composition of the all-wise Spirit: for the Holy Ghost spake by the mouth of David, and of the other inspired penmen. He guided both their hearts and their hands. The sentiments and the words are his: for the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost - they spake as he moved them - they indited the psalms under his inspiration. The praises therein given of the person and work of the ever blessed Immanuel are not human, but truly divine.

> better occupied than hey nony nony, hey troly loly and such like phantasies. If young men also that have the gift of singing took their pleasure in such wholesome ballads as the three children in his last chapter, it were a token that they felt some spark of God's love in their hearts ... for truly as we love so sing we .... As for the common sort of ballads which now are used in the world, I report me to every good man's conscience what wicked fruits they bring.[8]

Marot was soon to hear the woods and villages echo with the Psalms, and the term "Psalm singer" came to be synonymous with Protestant.[9]

Soon after the publication of metrical Psalms in France, the psalter of Sternhold and Hopkins (1562) made its appearance in the English service. During the reign of Elizabeth, whole chapters of the Bible were turned into rhyme and metre and sung. (The book of Acts, for example, was set to music and sung in the Chapel Royal.[10]) Although the singing of hymns of a non-biblical nature was permitted in the service by Queen Elizabeth (June, 1559), the right was not to any extent exercised. The singing of metrical psalms, however, quickly became a regular part of English worship.

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[8]Reeves, p. 119.

[9]John Spencer Curwen, "The Old Parochial Psalmody", Studies in Worship-Music Chiefly as regards congregational singing [First Series] Second Edition: Enlarged and Revised, (London, 1888), p. 2.

[10]Reeves, pp. 96-97.

[11]Curwen, p. 2:
> For the comforting of such as delight in music it may be permitted that in the beginning of Common Prayer either at the morning or evening there may be sung an hymn or such like song to the praise of Almighty God, in the best melody and music that may be devised, having respect that the sentence of the hymn may be rendered and perceived.

The paraphrases of Sternhold and Hopkins, written in the old English ballad measure of "Chevy Chase" and the "Bailiff's Daughter of Islington", were "Set forth and allowed to be sung in all Churches, of all the People together, before and after Morning and Evening Prayers; and also before and after Sermon: and moreover in private Houses, for their Godly Solace and Comfort: laying apart all ungodly Songs and Ballads, which tend only to the nourishing of Vice, and corrupting of Youth."[12] Sternhold was interested in writing for the common people and, therefore, "sacrificed literary polish for straightforward lucidity and faithfulness to the language of the scriptures."[13] The Psalms were sung to the tunes of the street and the taverns.[14] The first edition of the Psalter had only forty tunes, but the later edition (1621) by Ravenscroft contained ninety-eight. Eighty-eight of these tunes were to be used with psalms written in common or ballad metre, forty-four for four line stanzas, and forty-four for use with eight line stanzas. Beside these, there were two tunes each for use with psalms written in long metre, short metre, and either two lines of eight syllables each or four lines of four syllables each. Sternhold was amply rewarded. No other book, excepting the Bible itself, and the Book of Common Prayer, was so popular as the Sternhold and Hopkins' psalter. "Probably no other book was ever so roughly - although devoutly -

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[12]Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, and Others, The Whole Book of Psalms (Birmingham, 1762), title page.

[13]Frederick John Gillman, The Evolution of the English Hymn (London, 1927), p. 148.

[14]Reeves, pp. 96-97.

handled in translation as the Psalms; surely no other book of songs ever so went to the heart of the nation."[15]

In 1692 a New Version by Tate and Brady was published, but it never won the unanimous favour of the people.[16] Beside the authorised versions of the Psalms, many other metrical translations appeared.[17] Both Sidney and Spenser had made "translations" of the Psalms; Sidney's were circulated in manuscript, completed by his sister, the Countess of Pembroke, and published finally in 1823; Spenser's have never been found.[18] Many poets, important and unimportant, did partial versions. Donne, Herbert, Crashaw and Milton made notable paraphrases in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century Stephen Wheatland and Tipping Sylvester did the Psalms in heroics (Psalms of David, 1754). The two more important versions, however, were done by Sir John Denham (1715) and Sir Richard Blackmore (1721). Later in the century, aside from Watts's "Christianised" Psalms, Christopher Smart wrote Psalms (1765) to which Cowper subscribed.[19]

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[15]Reeves, p. 116.

[16]Curwen, pp. 18-19:
A poor man was asked by his minister why he did not join in the singing of the Psalms, as well as the repetition of his prayers, especially as he understood that he sang hymns with his family in his Sunday evening devotions. He replied, "David speaks so plain, that we cannot mistake his meaning, but as for Mr. Tate and Brady, they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid Him."

[17]Eight versions were authorised at one time or another:
Sternhold and Hopkins, 1562
James I, 1631
Francis Rouse, 1641
William Barton, 1654
Archbishop Parker, 1661
Tate and Brady, 1696
Sir Richard Blackmore, 1721

[18]Campbell, pp. 50-51; Julian, pp. 916-932, for fuller discussion.

[19]Robert Brittain, Poems by Christopher Smart (Princeton, 1950), p.49.

The use of the Psalter was further complicated by widespread illiteracy. So that those who could not read could take part in the singing, the psalms were "lined-out": the leader gave out two lines of the hymn at one time, the congregation sang them, then he lined-out the next two lines, until the psalm was complete. "In a hymn of eight verses ... there would be fifteen pauses, and the result was a great deal of flattening. Sometimes the congregation would fall a major third."[20] The use of an organ or any other musical instrument which might have aided somewhat was slow to come into use except in cathedrals and only against great opposition. The singing, as a result, was a mixed good. But at its best, it was a wonderful experience for some worshippers. Thomas Mace, Clerk of Trinity College, Cambridge, writing in 1644, describes the psalmody:

> Now here, he writes, you must take notice that they had then a custom in that church (which I heard not of in any other cathedral, which was), that always before the sermon the whole congregation sang a psalm, together with the choir and the organ, and you must also know that there was then a most excellent-large-plump-lusty-full-speaking-organ, which cost (as I am credibly informed) a thousand pounds. This organ, I say (when the Psalm was set before the sermon), being let out into all its fulness of stops, together with the choir began the Psalm. But when that vast concording unity of the whole congregational chorus came (as I may say) thundering in, ever so as it made the very ground shake under us (O, the unutterable ravishing soul's delight!). In the which I was so transported and wrapt up into high contemplation, that there was no room left in my whole man, viz., body, soul and spirit, for anything below divine and heavenly raptures; nor could there possibly be anything in earth to which that very singing might truly be compared, except the right apprehensions or conceivings of that glorious and miraculous choir recorded in the Scriptures at the dedication of the Temple, of which you may have read in the 2 Chron. ch. 5 to the end. But yet beyond this, I can truly say it

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[20] Curwen, p. 65.

> was useful to me in much higher manner, viz., even as a most lively similitude or representation of the beatifical, celestial or angelical choir above, which continually rejoice before God, adoring and singing praises to Him and of Him in all eternity.[21]

A less enthusiastic, but perhaps more realistic, picture is found in a letter to the Gentleman's Magazine for December, 1796, signed "T. Wollston":

> In some churches one may see the Parish Clerk, after giving out a couple of staves from Sternhold and Hopkins, with two or three other poor wights, drawling them out in the most lamentable strains, with such grimace, and in such discordant notes, as must shock every serious person, and afford mirth to the undevout. In other places, a few persons assembled in a gallery or pew take upon themselves the appellation of the choir, and these in another error are as disgustful as the former. Furnished with a number of instruments more fit for a military band than a church, they appear to sing to the praise and glory of themselves; for I am fearful that, in their singing God is not in all their thoughts. These sort of performers give us little else but 'high-flown anthems and fuging psalm tunes, the different parts hunting one another in so many quavers and demiquavers, that it is almost impossible to understand what they are singing.

Such a performance in the service of the Church would only too soon arouse the opposition of serious people to the use of a choir or the practice of congregational singing.

The development and use of the metrical psalms was of special importance in establishing the basic form the hymn would take in the eighteenth century. The hymn retained the ballad form, and it was written to be sung by a wide audience including the illiterate. It was not thought of, therefore, as a literary form. The psalms also led congregations to expect only biblical or biblically related themes and language to be used. When the hymn

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[21] Curwen, p. 5, from Musik's Monument (1676).

in English did gain acceptance it was little more than a metrical paraphrase of biblical passages designed to be sung by a semi-literate people to tunes familiar to them.

Watts and the Eighteenth-Century Hymn

For the use of dissenting chapels, Isaac Watts published Hymns and Spiritual Songs in Imitation of the Psalms (1707). It is this book of hymns which established the free congregational hymn for the English language. Without exception, every writer of hymns and compiler of hymn-books during the eighteenth century followed the pattern established by Isaac Watts. The organisation was simple. The volume was divided into three books, the first of which was entitled, "Collected from the Scripture".

> In the First, I have borrowed the Sense and much of the Form of the Song from particular Portions of Scripture, and have paraphrased most of the Doxologies in the New Testament, ... and many Parts of the Old Testament also, that have a Reference to the Times of the Messiah. In these I expect to be often censured for a too religious Observance of the Words of Scripture, whereby the Verse is weakened and debased, according to the Judgment of the Critics; But as my Design was to aid the Devotion of Christians, so more especially in this Part: And I am satisfied I shall hereby attain two Ends, namely, Assist the Worship of all serious Minds, to whom the Expressions of Scripture are ever dear and delightful, and gratify the Taste and Inclination of those who think nothing must be sung unto God but the Translations of his own Word. Yet you will always find in this Paraphrase dark Expressions enlightened, and the Levitical Ceremonies and Hebrew Forms of Speech changed into the Worship of the Gospel, and explained in the Language of our Time and Nation; and what would not bear such an Alteration is omitted and laid aside.[22]

The second book, "Composed on Divine Subjects", consists of hymns "whose Form is of mere Human Composure; but I hope the Sense and

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[22]Isaac Watts, Hymns and Spiritual Songs (London, 1771), pp. xi-xii.

Materials will always appear Divine. I might have brought some Text or other, and applied it to the Margin of every Verse, if this Method had been as useful as it was easy."[23]

Book Three does not differ in kind from either the first or second, but is a collection of hymns suitable for use with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Some of the hymns in this book are paraphrases of Scripture and others are of "mere human compusure". After Watts, hymns may be classified under two general heads, (I) paraphrases of Scripture and (2) freer compositions not bound by any single passage from the Bible, but which draw upon the Scriptures as a whole for their inspiration and language. When Watts indicated that every verse could easily be annotated, he was stating a truism, as we shall soon discover.

A poet who undertakes the writing of hymns has a difficult audience to whom he must appeal. Watt's statement of intention and his discussion of the problems of hymn-writing was to be repeated by subsequent writers; "it has been my Labour to promote the pious Entertainment of Souls truly serious, even of the meanest Capacity, and the same Time (if possible) not to give Disgust to Persons of richer Sense and nicer Education;...."[24] This laid restrictions both on his use of poetic embellishment and diction and upon the metres available for his use.

> The whole Book is written in <u>four</u> Sorts of Metre, and fitted to the most common Tunes. I have seldom permitted a Stop in the Middle of a Line, and seldom left the End of a Line without one, to comport a little with the unhappy Mixture of Reading and Singing, which

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[23] Watts, <u>Hymns</u>, p. xii.

[24] <u>Ibid</u>., p. xi.

> cannot presently be reformed. The Metaphors are generally sunk to the Level of vulgar Capacities. I have aimed at Ease of Numbers, and Smoothness of Sound, and endeavoured to make the Sense plain and obvious. If the Verse appears so gentle and flowing as to incur the Censure of Feebleness, I may honestly affirm, that sometimes it cost me Labour to make it so: Some of the Beauties of Poesy are neglected, and some wilfully defaced: I have thrown out the Lines that were too sonorous, and have given an Allay to the Verse, lest a more exalted Turn of Thought or Language should darken or disturb the Devotion of the weakest Souls. But hence it comes to pass, that I have been forced to lay aside many Hymns after they were finished, and utterly exclude them from this Volume, because of the bolder Figures of Speech that crowed themselves into the Verse, and a more unconfined Variety of Number, which I could not easily restrain.[25]

Hymns, it must be stressed, are applied <u>poetry</u>. Their end, or proper use, is the praise of God by the whole congregation gathered for public worship, but they are also "pious Meditations, to assist the devout and retired Soul in the Exercises of Love, Faith, and Joy."[26] Included in the collection, therefore, may be found some hymns written for common worship and others which are too personal or too private in their expressions to be used with propriety in public. Those which are public hymns should strive as well to avoid all which is of party or controversy. "The Contentions and distinguishing Words of Sects and Parties are secluded, that whole Assemblies might assist at the Harmony, and different Churches join in the same Worship without Offence....I think it most agreeable, that what is provided for public Singing, should give sincere Consciences as little Disturbance as possible .... where any unpleasing Word is found, he that leads the

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[25] Watts, <u>Hymns</u>, p. x. [26] <u>Ibid</u>., p. xiii.

Worship may substitute a better;...."[27] The alteration of hymns to avoid offending theological tastes was widely practised. Toplady almost certainly altered some of Cowper's hymns before publishing them in his Gospel Magazine, and John Wesley modified Toplady's hymns to remove their hypercalvinistic bias before including them in his collection.

The hymn-book, however, which undoubtedly influenced Cowper most directly was that compiled by his cousin, the Rev. Mr. Martin Madan, A Collection of Psalms and Hymns, Extracted from various Authors, And published by the Reverend Mr. [Martin Madan] (London, 1760). The bulk of the hymns in this collection were drawn from Watts (44+8) and the Wesleys (96+3).[28] Taking his ideas largely from Watts's Preface, Madan makes the selection of his hymns on the basis of three principles: (1) "Useful[ness] for Edification

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[27] Watts, Hymns, p. ix.

[28] For the second edition (1763), Madan added an additional 25 hymns. [Julian, Dictionary of Hymnology, (1906), p. 710, is incorrect. He states correctly that the 1760 edition contained 170 hymns. But the second edition adds 25, not 24, giving a total of 195 hymns. The error occurs because two hymns are accidentally numbered CXCIV.] Numbers in addition are those added in the second edition, 1763. List of writers (identified by Falconer Madan) with the number of hymns included:

Charles Wesley, 89+2	Joseph Addison, 1+1	Joseph Hart, +1
Isaac Watts, 44+8	Samuel Wesley, Sen., 2	George Herbert, 1
John Cennick, 13	" " Jr., 2	Bp. Thomas Ken, 1
Robert Seagrave, 6	John Austin, 1	Judith Madan, +1
John Wesley, 4+1	John Bakewell, 1	M, E. +1
James Allen, +4	Moses Browne, 1	Robert Robinson, 1
William Hammond, 4	Sir William Dolben, +1	Unidentified, per-
Tate & Brady, 2+1	Bp. John Cosin, 1	haps Madan, 5
One of the Wesleys, 3	John Gambold, 1	

Falconer Madan, The Madan Family, (Oxford, 1933), pp. 275-276.

in respect of Plainness and Simplicity of Expression".[29] Madan admits, however, that he has not always succeeded; "there are Expressions here and there as abstruse as if they were written in Arabic".[30] The reason lay not in his judgment, for the words and expressions so used are found in the Bible, "the very Words of that divine Book which are given by the Inspiration of the Spirit of God".[31] As a guide, Madan placed marginal references where he thought it necessary to keep the biblically illiterate "from despising the Words of God himself, and ignorantly falling into the grievous Sin of ridiculing the Scriptures".[32] This practice of identifying "very edifying Paraphrases ... upon the sacred Text", was also followed by Cowper to a limited extent in the first edition of the Olney Hymns.[33] (2) Madan "endeavoured to avoid inserting any thing that could tend to doubtful Disputations" and therefore omitted hymns expressing private notions or non-essentials.[34] What he believed to be central, however, would nonetheless offend Deists, Socinians, Papists, Antinomians and Formalists, the usual range of titles applied to non-Evangelicals. (3) "As due Care is taken to make the Matter of these Hymns as Scriptural as possible, so thou wilt find, gentle Reader, ... that Jesus the Great High Priest and blessed Apostle of our Profession, is the grand subject ... of every Song...."[35]

Again in Madan we find the twofold stress already noted in

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[29] Martin Madan, A Collection of Psalms and Hymns (London, 4th ed., 1765), p. iv.

[30] Ibid., p. iv. [31] Ibid., p. v. [32] Ibid., p. v.

[33] Ibid., p. v. [34] Ibid., p. v. [35] Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

Watts, that of simplicity and plainness to make the hymns intelligible to the simplest, and fidelity to the language and matter of the Bible as he understood it. It is not surprising then to find Cowper following the same pattern in his hymns and Newton repeating the same statements of Watts and Madan.

The Olney Hymns

"There is a style and manner suited to the composition of hymns", wrote John Newton in his Preface to the Olney Hymns (1799),

> which may be more successfully, or at least more easily attained by a versifier than by a poet. They should be Hymns, not Odes, if designed for public worship, and for the use of plain people. Perspicuity, simplicity, and ease, should be chiefly attended to: and the image and colouring of poetry, if admitted at all, should be indulged sparingly, and with great judgment.[36]

He quotes Watts's statement already discussed on restraining his poetic fire and concludes,

> If the Lord, whom I serve, has been pleased to favour me with that mediocrity of talent, which may qualify me for usefulness to the weak and the poor of his flock, without disgusting persons of superior discernment, I have reason to be satisfied.[37]

What Newton says of his own writing applies equally well to those hymns written by Cowper for the collection.

Many factors combined to make the hymn form natural for Cowper. The hymn was an humble but not undistinguished genre in the eighteenth century. Dryden had translated the Latin hymn,

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[36] John Newton and William Cowper, Olney Hymns, in Three Books (Glasgow, 1829), p. 48.

[37] Ibid., p. 49

"Veni, Creator Spiritus," Pope had "translated" a hymn of Thomas Aquinas and his "The Universal Prayer" is essentially a hymn. Addison had written five hymns for the Spectator, two of which are still sung today ("The spacious firmament on high" and "When all Thy mercies, O my God").[38] Dr. Johnson commented favourably on the hymns of Watts in his Lives of the Poets, and the critic Dennis among others had called for a rebirth of religious verse. Among the common people of Olney, the hymn was probably the only kind of verse which they encountered.

From his mental collapse in 1763 until at least 1772, the hymn was the verse form Cowper most frequently met. He said he read no poetry during these years, but hymns were not "poems". When he did begin to write, it was natural for him to turn first, therefore, to this form. At the suggestion of Newton and several others, Cowper began to write with Newton the volume which was to become the "hymnbook of the Low Church party in the Established Church" and was to be reprinted in England and America for a hundred years.

The Olney Hymns were originally composed for the people of the Olney congregation, and it is to them that the volume was dedicated.

> This publication, which, with my humble prayer to the Lord for his blessing upon it, I offer to the service and acceptance of all who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, of every name and in every place, into whose hands it may come, I more particularly dedicate to my

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[38] "The Lord my pasture shall prepare" (Spectator, No. 441); "When all Thy mercies, O my God" (No. 453); "The spacious firmament on high" (No. 465); "How are Thy servants blest, O Lord" (No. 489); and "When rising from the bed of death" (No. 513).

> dear friends in the parish and neighborhood of Olney, for whose use the hymns were originally composed, as a testimony of the sincere love I bear them, and as a token of my gratitude to the Lord and to them, for the comfort and satisfaction with which the discharge of my ministry among them has been attended.[39]

It is for this lace-making community of simple people with little or no formal education that the Hymns were written.

Cowper may have begun writing hymns at a far earlier date than has been noted. Dr. Nathaniel Cotton of St. Albans, who was himself a minor hymnist and writer of rather bad devotional verse, may have encouraged Cowper to write hymns after his conversion at Cotton's Collegium Insanorum. Telford suggests that Cowper may have written the hymn "The Light and Glory of the Word" as early as July, 1764.[40] Several authorities claim that "The Happy Change" and "Retirement", which are more religious poems than hymns, were written immediately after Cowper's release from St. Albans.[41] Nicholson argues that "Retirement" was written as early as 1763, while Cowper was still in the Inner Temple.[42]

Cowper's contributions to the Olney Hymns, however, were largely written between the years 1768 and 1773. After his second major collapse in 1773, he did not write hymns again until late in life. In a letter to the Rev. William Bull, May 25, 1788,

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[39]Newton, Olney Hymns, p. 47.

[40]John Telford, The Methodist Hymn-Book Illustrated (London, 1904), pp. 192-193.

[41]Charles Ryskamp, William Cowper (Cambridge, 1959), p. 163; Robert Southey, ed., The Life and Works of William Cowper, (London, 1835-1837), Vol. 6, p. 104.

[42]Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (London, 1951), p. 73.

Cowper indicates that he had been trying to write a hymn for a friend, but found it impossible.[43] During August of 1789, he wrote "Hear, Lord, the song of praise and pray'r", usually entitled, "For the Use of the Sunday School at Olney". It was published the following year in Rowland Hill's Divine Hymns in Easy Language for Children (1790), No. 37. Hill reprinted it in 1808 in his A Collection of Hymns for Children..., No. 179. Early in 1790 (January 3), he announced in a letter to Samuel Rose the completion of a revision of a volume of hymns for children by an unknown author.[44] Aside from these brief diversions, Cowper discontinued writing hymns after the time he believed himself to be eternally dammed.

Nearly thirty of the hymns appeared in other magazines and hymn-books prior to publication in the Olney collection. Newton complained that he had observed "one or two of them attributed to persons who certainly had no concern in them but as transcribers".[45] Twelve of the hymns by Newton and Cowper were published in the Gospel Magazine (edited by Augustus M. Toplady) between the years 1771 and 1778. Thirteen were attached to Newton's Twenty-six Letters on Religious Subjects (1774). Cowper's "Praise for the Foundation Opened", "Self-Acquaintance" and "Walking With God" appeared in Dr. Conyer's Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship (1772). In the summer of 1776, Toplady brought together and published from various sources Psalms and Hymns for Public and

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[43] Cowper, Letters, I. p. 271.

[44] Ibid., I, pp. 415-416.

[45] Newton, Preface to Olney Hymns, p. 47.

Private Worship; he included two of Newton's hymns and Cowper's "Walking with God", "Praise for the Fountain Opened", and "Light Shining Out of Darkness" (all of which he had previously used in the Gospel Magazine), and "Peace After a Storm" and "Self-Acquaintance" for the first time. Cowper's beautiful "Lovest Thou Me?" appeared as early as 1768 in Maxfield's New Appendix.

The Olney Hymns were published on February 15, 1779. John Thornton of Clapham had suggested the publication of the hymns, underwrote the costs, and ordered one thousand copies for his own personal distribution. As early as August 4, 1770, Newton had included hymns in his all but weekly letters to Thornton.[46] He had undoubtedly done the same with his other correspondents. "I have had so many solicitations at home and abroad to publish them, I know not how to stand out any longer. Perhaps they may be useful and I have little doubt but they will sell, at least so far as to prevent loss by printing .... I hope they will be finished before March ...."[47]

Of the 347 hymns in the collection, Cowper contributed only 67. The number of hymns Cowper was to contribute was to have been larger, but as Newton indicates in his preface, Cowper's mental illness marred the original plan.

A desire of promoting the faith and comfort of sincere

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[46] Letter by John Newton to John Thornton, 4 August, 1770. Unpublished in the private collection of John Thornton of Southbourne and used by permission.

[47] Unpublished letter by John Newton to John Thornton, 26 November, 1778. In the Thornton Collection.

> Christians, though the principal, was not the only motive to this undertaking. It was likewise intended as a monument, to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship. With this pleasing view I entered upon my part, which would have been smaller than it is, and the book would have appeared much sooner, and in a very different form, if the wise though mysterious providence of God, had not seen fit to cross my wishes. We had not proceeded far upon our proposed plan, before my dear friend was prevented, by a long and affecting indisposition, from affording me any further assistance. My grief and disappointment were great; I hung my harp upon the willows, and for some time thought myself determined to proceed no further without him. Yet my mind was afterwards led to resume the service. My progress in it, amidst a variety of other engagements, has been slow; yet, in a course of years, the Hymns amounted to a considerable number; and my deference to the judgment and desires of others, has at length overcome the reluctance I long felt to see them in print, while I had so few of my friend's Hymns to insert in the collection.[48]

It is an unusual collection in that only two contributed to it. With the notable exception of the Wesleys' and Watts's, every hymn-book of importance in the eighteenth century is an anthology drawing from many writers.

The hymns which Cowper contributed to the collection are the product of a sane mind, but one of the reasons why Newton suggested the joint project may have been to distract Cowper from his anxieties and doubts. In a letter to Newton (March, 1771), Cowper says, "If you find yourself hindered by an outside bustle, I am equally hindered by a bustle within. The Lord, I trust, will give peace of mind in his own time; but I can truly say for the most part that my soul is among lions". Although his despondency was increasing during the period of composition, its only effect may be reflected in the extremely personal note in

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[48]Newton, Preface to Olney Hymns, pp. 47-48.

some of the hymns and his anxiety over election.

The organisation of the Olney Hymns is similar to that of the hymn-books of Isaac Watts and the Wesleys. The first book, "On Select Passages of Scripture", of 141 hymns, moves through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation drawing on 37 of the 66 books of the Bible, especially the Gospels (39 hymns), and 80 on Old Testament texts. Of the hymns in this section, Cowper wrote 15 on Old Testament passages and only 6 on New Testament texts. This emphasis on the Old Testament is apparent rather than real since the Old is always interpreted and understood in the light of the New Testament.

Book Two, "On Occasional Subjects", contains only ten hymns by Cowper. This book is divided into smaller sections entitled: I. Seasons (New Year Hymns, Before Annual Sermons, After Annual Sermons and Christmas); II. Ordinances (Sacramental Hymns, Prayer, Scripture); III. Providences (Fast-Day Hymns, Funeral Hymns); IV. Creation. Perhaps the reason for so few hymns by Cowper in this group is the nature of the subject matter of the section. Newton was more concerned with the offices of the church and its liturgical aspects; Cowper was more familiar with the devotional.

Book Three, "On the Rise, Progress, Changes, and Comforts of the Spiritual Life", contains thirty-six hymns by Cowper. This section is organised much like the Methodist hymn-book, and like Book Two, is divided into sub-sections. The number of hymns contributed to each section by Cowper are: I. Solemn addresses to sinners (none); II. Seeking, Pleading, and Hoping (three); III. Conflicts (eleven); IV. Comforts (eight); V. Dedication

and Surrender (four); VI. Cautions (seven); VII. Praise (three); and VIII. Short Hymns (none). The subjective nature of most of Cowper's hymns is indicated by his contributing the largest number in this section to "Conflicts" and "Comforts".

Cowper is not conscious of the Christian Year. For him, the seasons are those of the heart and of religious experience. Although, as Keck has discovered, almost all of the texts upon which Cowper wrote hymns are found in appointed lessons of the lectionary, there is no indication Newton ever followed it except in a rough fashion.[49] The first book of the collection shows Cowper at work as a paraphraser and commentator on the Bible. From his source, he gains inspiration, but at other times his close adherence to the literal words or images of Scripture mars the hymn. Frequently he follows the passage too closely or uses an image acceptable and moving in its biblical context but ludicrous and tasteless when developed. Cowper's attachment to the words and imagery of the Bible, however, began almost thirty years before the publication of the Olney Hymns.

Paraphrases of Biblical Passages

One of the earliest poems Cowper wrote (probably during his early years in the Middle Temple, 1748-52), was a paraphrase of Psalm 137. The paraphrase was probably not written for singing but as a verse exercise; there is no psalm tune to which this stanza pattern (8686886) could be sung. Matthew Prior used a free paraphrase of the same psalm near the conclusion of Solomon

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[49] Keck, "Olney Hymns", p. 148.

a poem which Cowper especially admired.[50] Cowper's paraphrase is a very close one.

To Babylon's proud waters brought,
In bondage where we lay,
With tears on Sion's Hill we thought,
And sigh'd our hours away;
Neglected on the willows hung
Our useless harps, while ev'ry tongue
Bewail'd the fatal day.

Then did the base insulting foe
Some joyous notes demand,
Such as in Sion used to flow
From Judah's happy band -
Alas! what joyous note have we,
Our country spoil'd, no longer free,
And in a foreign land?

Oh Solyma! if e'er thy praise
Be silent in my song,
Rude and unpleasing be the lays,
And artless be my tongue!
Thy name my fancy still employs;
To thee, great fountain of my joys,
My sweetest joys belong.

Remember, Lord! that hostile sound,
When Edom's children cried,
Raz'd be her turrets to the ground,
And humbl'd be her pride!
Remember, Lord! and let the foe
The terrors of thy vengeance know
The vengeance they defied.

Thou too, great Babylon, shall fall
A victim to our God;
Thy monstrous crimes already call
For Heav'n's chastising rod.
Happy who shall thy little ones
Relentless dash against the stones,
And spread their limbs abroad.

1 By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
3 For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
6 If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.
7 Remember, O Lord, thy children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it even to the foundation thereof.
8 O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.
9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

This psalm is rarely used today, and then only the first seven

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[50] Matthew Prior, The Literary Works of Matthew Prior (Oxford, 1959), Vol. I, pp. 382-383; "Solomon", Book III, ll. 789-832. Pamela sang this psalm while imprisoned by Squire B, and Shenstone's schoolmistress (stanza 14) sang Sternhold and Hopkins' version. Sir Philip Sidney made a particularly good paraphrase of it.

verses are sung. William Romaine omitted it entirely from his collection, and Watts's Christianised version removes the violence as does Matthew Prior. It is startling, therefore, that the young Cowper should have chosen this psalm to paraphrase, and that instead of tempering the savagery of the concluding lines, he heightens it. For one who has been steeped in the Old Testament in which the wrath of Jehovah is too often violently portrayed - the slaughter of the first born males of Egypt, for example, in Exodus - this violence may have been less disturbing.

Yet violence occurs often in the Olney Hymns, as well as in several of Cowper's shorter poems. Cowper tends to emphasise the judicial side of the atonement and the acts of God's justice rather than those of mercy and the high priestly role of Christ. Jesus is too often a sacrifice to God the Father or to a kind of impersonal justice.

> Jesus, whose blood so freely stream'd
> To satisfy the law's demand

and

> To reconcile offending man,
> Make Justice drop her angry rod.[51]

This is the harsher side of Calvinistic Evangelicalism, but one which was usually mellowed in practice. Cowper, however, expands the original text to stress God's vengeance and "Heav'n's chastising rod". There is a relish in the savagery which is missing in the versions of Sternhold and Hopkins, Tate and Brady and Sir Philip Sidney. This display of violence reflects a turn of mind which we shall discuss more fully later.

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[51] Newton and Cowper, Olney Hymns, "Jehovah - Shalom, The Lord Send Peace".

Cowper generally did not write simple paraphrases of biblical passages for the Olney Hymns.[52] One of the few is "Sardis", a paraphrase of Revelations iii. 1-6. Newton was preaching a series of sermons on the letters to the seven churches of the Apocalypse. For these, Newton wrote four hymns ("Ephesus", "Smyrna", "Philadelphia" and "Laodicea") and asked Cowper to write one.

"Write to Sardis, saith the Lord,
And write what he declares;
He whose Spirit, and whose word,
Upholds the seven stars:
All thy works and ways I search,
Find thy love and zeal decay'd;
Thou art call'd a living church,
But thou art cold and dead.

Watch, remember, seek and strive
Exert thy former pains;
Let thy timely care revive,
And strengthen what remains:
Cleanse thine heart, thy works amend,
Former times to mind recall;
Lest my sudden stroke descend,
And smite thee once for all.

Yet I number now in thee,
A few that are upright;
These my Father's face shall see,
And walk with me in white:
When in judgment I appear,
They for mine shall be confess'd;
Let my faithful servants hear,
And woe be to the rest".

1 And unto the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.
2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God.
3 Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.
4 Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.
5 He that overcometh, the same shall be cloathed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.
6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

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[52] Cowper wrote five which may be strictly described as paraphrases: XIII. "The Covenant", Ezek. xxxvi. 25-28; X. "The Future Peace and Glory of the Church", Isa. lx. 15-20; XVI. "The Sower", Matt. xiii. 3 -8, 18-23 ; XXXIV. "Seeking the Beloved", Song of Songs, v. ; and "Sardis".

"Sardis" is more free than Cowper's paraphrase of Psalm 137 and also rather better. Usually when the New Testament was paraphrased, greater freedom was allowed the versifier. The tradition of metrical paraphrases of the Psalms was comparatively rigid and little deviation from the inspired text and was accepted. The New Testament, written as prose, was less easily, and usually less successfully turned into metre.

In this paraphrase, Cowper depends almost entirely upon the words of Scripture for his effect. The mysterious symbols ("seven stars") are intended to evoke a response of awe and wonder. Only the second stanza and the final line amplify the text, not for poetic reasons, but to emphasise repentance, the proper response of man to God's judgment and God's vengeance. The versification diminishes the power of the prose. The pattern of stress lacks variety and rather pounds along monotonously. The use of biblical language is wooden and unimaginative.

Hymns on Biblical Texts

Related to Cowper's hymns roughly called paraphrases were those whose structure followed essentially an homiletical pattern. Newton clearly saw the hymn as a means of reinforcing what he said in his sermons. Most of his hymns about whose composition we know anything, were written in relation to the sermon and usually on the same biblical text.[53] Already noted are the hymns in the

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[53] Some of Newton's homiletical hymns are "When Joseph his brethern beheld", Gen. xlv. 3-4; "My soul once had its plenteous years", Gen. xli. 56; "See Aaron, God's anointed priest", Levit. xiii. 7-9; "How bless'd the righteous are", Numb. xxiii. 10; "The lion that on Samson roar'd", Judges xiv. 8; "How David, when by sin deceived", 2 Sam. xi. 27; and "Poor Sinners! little do they think", Dan. v. 5-6.

Olney collection on the seven cities of the Book of Revelation. Another group are those he wrote each year for the special New Year's Eve watch-night service. "I usually compose 2 or 3 for the occasion of the sermon I preach on the New Years evening to the young people".[54] For December 31, 1776, he wrote two, copies of which he enclosed in his letter to John Thornton and annotated "Before Sermon" ("The God who once to Israel spoke") and the other "After Sermon from 2 Cor. 5. 20" ("Thy message by the preacher sealed").[55]

Newton was also fond of writing hymns and preaching sermons on topics of immediate interest. These local events he would interpret in the light of Evangelical doctrines, especially providence, a practice by no means limited to Evangelicals in the eighteenth century (cf. the flood of sermons published on the occasion of the Lisbon earthquake). On July 30, 1776, a lunar eclipse occurred upon which Newton wrote "The morn in silver glory shone".[56] The method of organisation which Newton used in his sermons he also used for many of his hymns. Both Newton's practice and his use of hymns in the services at Olney undoubtedly affected Cowper's understanding of the hymn form.

Many of Cowper's hymns, especially those on Select Passages of Scripture (Book I), follow the homiletical pattern of a sermon.

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[54]John Newton to John Thornton, 21 January, 1777. MS letter in the Thornton Collection.

[55]Ibid.

[56]John Newton to John Thornton, 6 August, 1776. MS letter in the Thornton Collection.

The first stanza states the theme or a free paraphrase of the biblical text, and the succeeding stanzas develop or expound the passage. The concluding verse is often the application of the truth to the heart of the individual believer. The familiar hymn, "Hark, my soul! it is the Lord", takes the text from the Gospel of John, xxi. 16 (He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep.). After a brief three line introduction identifying the speaker as Jesus, Cowper places into his mouth seventeen lines which are all but quotations drawn from a variety of New Testament sayings of Jesus, and then concludes with a prayer of response, or an application to his own heart of the words of Christ.

Hark, my soul! it is the Lord;
'Tis the Saviour, hear his word;
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee;
"Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?

I deliver'd thee when bound,
And, when wounded, heal'd thy wound;
Sought thee wand'ring, set thee right,
Turn'd thy darkness into light.

Can a woman's tender care
Cease, towards the child she bare?
Yes, she can forgetful be,
Yet will I remember thee.

Mine is an unchanging love,
Higher than the heights above;
Deeper than the depths beneath,
Free and faithful, strong as death.

Thou shalt see my glory soon,
When the work of grace is done;
Partner of my throne shalt be;
Say, poor sinner, lov'st thou me?"

Lord, it is my chief complaint,
That my love is weak and faint;
Yet I love thee and adore,
Oh for grace to love thee more!

The repetition of the opening lines of Jesus' speech at the closing adds pathos to the gentle and tender appeal for response; the petitionary character of the hymn is especially effective.

The biblical incident chosen is one of the most memorable in the Gospels. After the death and resurrection of Christ, Peter confused and uncomprehending returned to his fish nets on Galilee. In the early dawn, the resurrected Christ appears and calls to Peter and the others from the shore. Impetuous and naked, Peter grabs a cloak and throws himself into the sea and swims ashore. It is the third appearance of Jesus to his disciples since the resurrection. While sharing the breakfast of fish with them around the fire, Jesus turns to Peter who had denied him and asks simply, repeating the question three times (corresponding to the number of Peter's denials of him), "Lovest thou me?" Cowper's use of the repetition has biblical warrant and reinforces the memory of the passage used. The effective use of the question form also comes from the text and carries biblical authority. The poet's response, simple and brief, is emotionally prepared for and is comparable to the agonised response of the penitent Peter, "Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee".

Metrically, the hymn shows how well Cowper can use a seven syllable line with an initial and terminal stress. An initial accent adds to the ease of singing a hymn since the usual musical measure stresses the first and third notes. The initial accent also gives special force to the questions asked by Jesus.

One of Cowper's better hymns, and one of the half dozen still regularly included in hymnals, it is particularly interesting as an example of how Cowper does occasionally achieve that absolute simplicity of tone and emotional control not unlike that of George

Herbert. The hymn trembles on the edge of mawkishness but is firmly controlled by the objectivity of the Scriptural allusions. His use of irony, not frequently found in Cowper, also contributes. Jesus speaks in terms of opposites and thereby the possibility of the impossible, that Christ should love the unlovable. Freedom is contrasted with bondage, healing with wounding, light with darkness, divine love with the highest human love, reaching to the highest and the lowest, and is "strong as death". The simple, humble answer of the concluding stanza builds upon the earlier antitheses and stresses the inadequacy of human love which is compensated for by the desire for a greater capacity to love granted by grace.

At other times Cowper preaches topical sermons with Scriptural illustrations. "Old Testament Gospel", on Hebrews iv. 2, discussed in detail later, is an excellent illustration of this. The first stanza states his general theme which arises from the text. He then devotes the following four stanzas to four illustrations from the Old Testament, and concludes with an application and prayer. "Jehovah - Jireh, The Lord Will Provide", on Genesis xxii. 14, follows the same pattern.[57] The first stanza states the theme.

> The saints should never be dismay'd,
> Nor sink in hopeless fear;
> For when they least expect his aid,
> The Saviour will appear.

There follow three illustrations of how God cared for his chosen ones;

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[57] John Newton wrote another hymn on the same text ("Though troubles assail") which is much less tied to the biblical text and simply applies the text, "The Lord will provide", as a refrain to each of his eight stanzas. Newton is more concerned to show by experience how the Lord will provide in particular situations - in troubles, in hunger, in temptation, in weakness and at death - rather than illustrating how God has cared for his saints in the past.

all three incidents especially well known to anyone with some acquaintance with the Old Testament. From Genesis xxii. 12-13:

> This Abraham found, he rais'd the knife,
> God saw, and said, "Forbear;
> Yon ram shall yield his meaner life,
> Behold the victim there."

David also received help, spectacularly, according to I Samuel xxiii. 27:

> Once David seem'd Saul's certain prey;
> But hark! the foe's at hand,
> Saul turns his arms another way,
> To save th' invaded land.

Cowper then turns to the familiar story of Jonah i. 17:

> When Jonah sunk beneath the wave
> He thought to rise no more;
> But God prepar'd a fish to save,
> And bear him to the shore.

From these infallible proofs of God's careful concern, he is inspired to trust for himself and exhorts others in trouble to take hope:

> Blest proofs of pow'r and grace divine,
> That meet us in his word!
> May ev'ry deep-felt care of mine
> Be trusted with the Lord.
>
> Wait for his seasonable aid
> And tho' it tarry wait:
> The promise may be long delay'd,
> But cannot come too late.

This hymn may be sound biblical preaching, but it is hardly successful as poetry. Cowper's use of Scripture is here mechanical and uninspired. The illustrations are merely illustrative, the language is flat and again the rhythm almost calls for parody. The episodes chosen to illustrate the theme are dramatically confused, especially Saul who in the act of slaying David is drawn off to more important concerns. Again, Cowper is betrayed by a too literal

following of the Scripture. The last stanza is also bad. The "tarry wait" is awkward, and, of course, it is not the "promise" which is long delayed but its fulfilment. The hymn sounds very much like the lines from a church school pageant with each youngster taking a separate stanza for recitation. The hymn remains only a sermon.

The homiletical pattern used in their hymns may have been the chief contribution Cowper and Newton made to the craft of hymn writing. Certainly it established a pattern followed frequently since. It did not, however, result in many hymns of lasting value either for use in worship or as poetry. The attitude toward and use of Scripture resulted, however, in hymns of a biblical character which went beyond paraphrase and applied the text to contemporary men and their problems.

Reading the Bible as a glass through which Christ was to be seen, made it easy for the Evangelicals to draw indiscriminately on scattered and seemingly unrelated passages, to illustrate and to give point to the ideas conveyed. When carefully done, or when the language and incidents of the Bible were so fused as to be a whole, an effective hymn resulted.

Cowper's first hymn in the Olney collection, "Walking with God", is still one of the more popular, and is one of his best written hymns.[58] The hymn is written on one of the more mysterious passages of the Bible, and a popular text among Evangelicals, often used for funeral sermons: "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis v. 24).

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[58]In a letter to Mrs. Madan, (December, 10, 1767), Cowper explained

The metaphor of walking with God is one of the most common in the Bible. "Walking", or some form of the word, occurs over 350 times, and in a high proportion of instances, it is used metaphorically to refer to walking with God, to walking in truth or in lies, to walking after the flesh, or in the way. The Creator is described in Genesis iii. 8, as "walking in the garden in the cool of the day", and newly fallen Adam and Eve hide from him. A characteristic way to speak of a close relationship is to describe it as a walk. In the Old Testament, man is described as walking with God and in his statutes. In the Revelation (iii. 4) the writer describes the reward for those who "have not defiled their garments, ... they shall walk with me in white; for they are worthy". When God, according to the Gospels, became man in Jesus Christ, walking with God became realised in literal terms. The disciples walk with him throughout the country. Jesus walks on the turbulent waters of Galilee to the disciples struggling toward Capernaum, and Peter attempts to walk to him (Matthew xiv. 25, 29). The pastoral character of life in the land of the Bible made walking the most natural metaphor to describe the Christian life, and the "way" is the term

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[58](cont.) how it was written.

> I began to compose them yesterday morning before daybreak, but fell asleep at the end of the two first lines: when I awakened again, the third and fourth were whispered to my heart in a way which I have often experienced.

"Jesus, Where'er Thy People Meet" is one of the few other hymns whose composition we can date with reasonable accuracy. This hymn was written for the first service in the Great House, a parish hall used for the week-day prayer meetings, opened in April, 1769.

Jesus used most frequently to describe Christianity.

The most stirring biblical passage which describes a walk with God, however, is Luke xxiv. 13-35, in which the risen Christ joins two unnamed disciples on their way down from Jerusalem to Emmaus, to whom he explains the Old Testament in terms of himself and then reveals himself to them in the breaking of bread. Their conclusion, "Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" became a key Evangelical text both in the proper use of the Old Testament and for the importance of a "heart-warming" experience of God.

We can expect to see the Old Testament texts which refer to walking with God interpreted by the Evangelicals as walking with Christ. Charles Wesley, for example, wrote a short hymn on the same text as Cowper's hymn.

> O that I might walk with God!
> Jesus my companion be,
> Lead me to the blest abode,
> Thro' the fire, or thro' the sea:
> Join'd to thee by humble love
> Nothing I desire beside,
> Only let me never move,
> Never stir without my Guide.[59]

John Newton often used the same metaphor to describe the Christian's life, not as just a follower of Christ, but as a friend and companion. In a letter to Mr. Brewer, Newton tells him of Cowper's recent mental collapse and his delusion that he is eternally damned.

Heavy indeed is the trial with which the Lord has visited

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[59] Charles Wesley, Short Hymns on Select Passages of the Holy Scripture (Bristol, 1762), Vol I, p. 14.

> him, and, to appearance, no one needed it less. I can hardly form an idea of a closer walk with God than he uniformly maintained. Communion with God and the good of His people seemed to be the only objects he had in view from the beginning to the end of the year, and he was remarkably thriving and happy to the very hour when his trouble overtook him...[60]

Newton also contributed a hymn to the Olney collection on the same text: "By faith in Christ I walk with God". The first stanza states the theme which is developed in the following verses. God is his leader and guides his footsteps through the desert of life, guards him from dangers, supplies him with "every needful good", listens to his conversation, and reveals his love to him and encourages him when his is downcast. Newton concludes with a summary stanza:

> I pity all that wordlings talk
> Of pleasures that will quickly end:
> Be this my choice, O Lord, to walk
> With Thee, my Guide, my Guard, my Friend.

Typically, Newton's hymn differs from Cowper's in the simple sturdy faith he expresses, personal but unduly introspective, hopeful, cheerful, at ease in his faith. Lacking is the anxiety and failure of faith which is such a common note in Cowper's hymns.

Newton also preached one sermon at Olney on Micah vi. 6-8, the last verse of which is one of the best know biblical texts: "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" In his usual way, Newton interprets the passage in terms of Christ; the title of the sermon expresses its content: "No access to God but by the Gospel of Christ".

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[60] Josiah Bull, ed., John Newton ... An Autobiography and Narrative (London, 1868), pp. 197-198.

In that part of the sermon which discusses "to walk humbly", Newton links the phrase to Amos iii. 3, and proceeds to express homiletically almost exactly what Cowper says poetically in the hymn.

> "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" When Christ is your peace, you will delight in God; you will set him before you, commune with him, study to please him, and to keep all his commandments. This is to walk with God; and you will walk humbly, remembering how much you owe to free grace, and how far you fall short in your best endeavours. These considerations, impressed by the Holy Spirit, will humble you, will keep you from being high in your own esteem, wise in your own conceit, and from seeking great things for yourself. You will be habitually thankful when the Lord gives, content when he withholds, patient when he afflicts. You will confess yourself unworthy of the smallest mercies you possess, and acknowledge in your heaviest trials that he has laid far less upon you than your iniquities have deserved.[61]

In a hymn on walking with God, we should expect a stress on humility, a patient acceptance of God's will, and a quiet joy. All these are found in Cowper's "Walking With God".

Oh! for a closer walk with God, (1776 and 1777)
A calm and heav'nly frame;
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus, and his word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoy'd! (once/then)
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void (they have left/now I find)
The world can never fill. (/Which only God can fill)

Return, O Holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest;
I hate the sins that made thee mourn,
And drove thee from my breast.

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[61] John Newton, Twenty Sermons Preached at Olney in Buckinghamshire, Works, (London, 1824), Vol. II, p. 549.

The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be;
Help me to tear it from thy throne, (tear/bear)
And worship only thee.

So shall my walk be close with God, (So/And)
Calm and serene my frame;
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb.[62]

The hymn departs entirely from the Old Testament text upon which it is written except for the basic metaphor of man walking with God. Enoch's walk with Jehovah has been interpreted in terms of the New Testament, the experience is applied in highly emotional and personal terms, and the concrete particularity of the Bible has evaporated into traditional symbolic abstractions. But Cowper here uses abstract images and words with good effect. None of the

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[62] "Walking With God" was published at least three times before 1779: (1) in Dr. Conyer's Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship (1772); (2) as "Self-Examination" (No. CXXXVII) in Toplady's Psalms and Hymns (1776), pp. 141-142; and (3) in The Gospel Magazine (edited by Toplady) for December, 1777, Vol. IV, p. 657, with a musical setting appended to the volume. These last two versions differ from that which appeared in 1779. The above two versions are the same, except that printed by Toplady in his 1776 collection adds two additional verses to the hymn.

Jesus, my Lord, my Life, my Light, (1776)
O come with blissful ray:
Break radiant through the shades of night,
And chase my clouds away.

Then shall my soul with rapture trace
The tokens of thy love:
But the full glorys of thy face
Are only known above.

These are probably not Cowper's. Only Toplady published this version, and Cowper never acknowledged these additions in the editions which passed through his hands. They do not sound like Cowper; in fact they appear to be very much like some of Toplady's own work. As an extreme Calvinist, he would not allow any stress on man's part in his own salvation. The additions and the variations in the first six stanzas alter the hymn theologically toward hyper-Calvinism. The level of poetic composition is lower and the hymn emotionally and structurally is complete at the end of stanza six.

words as used - "Lamb", "Dove", "light", "road", "rest" - are really concrete; we do not see or call to mind these animals or things and their qualities, but the person of Christ with his attributes and that most abstract person of the God-head, the Holy Spirit. Some are Evangelical abstractions fuzzing off into jargon; "blessedness", for example. "Soul-refreshing view of Jesus" is the brightest use of language in the hymn; by looking to Jesus his soul is refreshed and revived. Yet the very allusiveness and abstractness of the hymn is part of its strength. "World", for example, combines the sense of size and all-inclusiveness of the ordinary use as well as the specialised Evangelical meaning of sinful material pleasures and luxury.

The structure of the hymn is clearly defined. The first stanza states the problem and defines it in biblical terms. He longs for a closer walk with God such as Enoch had. Implicit in the text also is the belief that such a walk takes one from this world of anxieties (l. 12) to an eternity of heavenly bliss with the Father. He seeks, therefore, for a "calm and heavenly frame" upon which he can depend and for the only light which can illumine his darkness and lead him to the Lamb. The tone is anxious and pleading. The final stanza repeats the essential elements of the first but in a different tone. Now he expresses the calm faith that his walk will be close with God and that the necessary "purer light" will be given to show him the way. Framed by these two stanzas are two sets of two stanzas each. The first set, stanzas two and three, is an almost strident cry torn from him by the memories of past joys in believing, his happiness at conver-

sion, and that "soul-refreshing view" of Jesus and his word. The joy of his earlier walk with God gave "peaceful hours" whose lingering sweetness makes his present alienation only the more painful and diversions only the more empty. The second set, stanzas four and five, is a prayer addressed to the Holy Spirit, the dove who is the "purer light" and necessary guide. The dove as the "messenger of rest" is a standard reference to the Holy Spirit as the one who brings a "sabbath rest" to the sin-tost soul, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Confession of sin and penitence naturally follow.

The force of the monosyllabic verbs - "hate", "drove" and "tear" - and the repeated urgency of "return ... return" stress his plea and emphasise his hatred of all which has alienated him from God.[63] Cowper characteristically controls his better lines with strong verbs. Stanza five, the emotional climax of his struggle, gains effect metrically as well by the inversion of the first foot of line three - "Help me" - and thereby adds stress to

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[63] Cowper uses much the same terms to express a similar idea less effectively in a later hymn.

> I hate the thought that wrongs the Lord;
> Oh, I would drive it from my breast,
> With thy own two-edged sword,
> Far as the east is from the west.
> (The Valley of the Shadow of Death, Bk. III, xx)

See also "The House of Prayer" (Bk. I, xcvi), on Mark xi. 17, which works with the same theme more concretely, especially verse five:

> Oh for the joy thy presence gives,
> What peace shall reign when thou art here!
> Thy presence makes this den of thieves
> A calm delightful house of prayer.

his cry for aid. The added concreteness of the imagery - tearing the idol from God's throne - gives force. The first five stanzas are torn with anxiety and longing; the last resolves this tension and expresses confidence, serenity and peace, thereby anticipating the answer to his prayer.

Scriptural allusions add to the colouring and emotional content of "Walking With God", but Cowper's "Praise for the Fountain Opened" at least partially fails because of its literal use of biblical metaphors wrenched from their context. The offence frequently felt by critics of this hymn arises primarily from the christological interpretation of the Old Testament text upon which it is based.[64] In its context, there is no suggestion that the fountain prophesied was to be filled with blood. Yet it was inevitable that it would be so interpreted by Evangelical Christians searching the Old Testament for references to the Christ. Blood, of course, is a common metaphor for redemption throughout both the Old and the New Testament, but the very frequency of its use had resulted in an almost automatic passing through the literal image to the spiritual content. Rare indeed, especially among Protestants, is the tendency to see the consecrated wine of Holy Communion as the physical blood of Christ though the liturgy so describes it. Evangelicals were particularly free with their use of "blood" as a metaphor.

The text from Zechariah upon which "Praise for the Fountain Opened" is written was a popular one among the Evangelicals and

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[64] Hugh I'Anson Fausset, William Cowper (London, 1928), p. 121, calls this hymn "notorious".

was used repeatedly in their hymns. "In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness". (Zechariah xiii. 1). In Martin Madan's Collection, which was Cowper's hymn-book, there are three hymns which draw on this verse and refer to it by footnotes; "Jesus thou art my righteousness", "How sad our state by nature is" and "Jesus, the all-atoning Lamb".[65] The first is almost a direct paraphrase, but it combines with this passage the blood sprinkling of Exodus xii. 13 and xxiv. 8 ("And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning these words"). The primary stress is upon the cleansing power of the fountain.

My dying Saviour and my God!
  Fountain for Guilt and Sin! [Zech. xiii. 1.]
Sprinkle me ever with thy Blood [Peter 1.]
  And cleanse and keep me clean.

Wash me, and make me thus thine own,
  Wash me, and mine Thou art,
Wash me, but not my Feet alone,
  My Hands, my Head, my Heart!

Th' Atonement of thy Blood apply,
  Till Faith to Sight improve,
Till Hope shall in Fruition die,
  And all my Soul be Love!

In "How sad our state by nature is", the fourth stanza paraphrases Zechariah xiii. 1 and makes the fountain clearly one of blood with cleansing properties.

To the blest Fountain of thy Blood,
  Teach us, O Lord, to fly:
There may we wash our spotted Souls,
  From crimes of deepest Dye!

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[65] Martin Madan, Hymns, pp. 76-77, ll. 6f; pp. 51-52, ll. 13f; p. 27, ll. 7-8.

The other hymn in the Madan collection, "An Evening Hymn", also associates cleansing and sprinkling with the fountain of blood.

> We ask thy Grace to make us clean,
> We come to Thee, our God;
> Open, O Lord, for this Day's Sin,
> The Fountain of thy Blood.
>
> Hither our actions, righteous deem'd,
> By Man, and counted and good,
> As filthy Rags by God esteemed, [Isa. lxiv. 6.]
> 'Till sprinkled with thy Blood.

Isaac Watts, with greater restraint, uses this same passage in "In vain we lavish out our lives".[66] This hymn is a conglomeration of paraphrases of scattered texts. Stanza four is a metrical version of Zechariah xiii. 1., "Christianised" in Watts's usual manner. Again the fountain is one of blood, and the final line is very close to Cowper's "Drawn from Emmanuel's veins".

> Come, and he'll cleanse our spotted Souls,
> And wash away our Stains
> In the dear Fountain that his Son
> Pour'd from his dying Veins.

Watts also uses the concept of washing with blood in "The All-Seeing God", in his Divine and Moral Songs for the Instruction of Children.[67]

> Remember all the dying pains
> That my Redeemer felt;
> And let his blood wash out my stains,
> And answer for my guilt.

Philip Doddridge, whose works Cowper was reading intensively at this time, wrote a hymn on the same text for his Hymns Founded on Various Texts (1775), "The Fountain of Life", which is similar to

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[66] Isaac Watts, Hymns and Spiritual Songs (London, 1771), p. 9.

[67] Isaac Watts, Divine and Moral Songs (Edinburgh, 1851), p. 18.

Cowper's own.[68] The fountain is filled with water, but the second stanza associates blood and cleansing with it.

Hail, Everlasting Spring!
Celestial Fountain, hail!
The Streams Salvation bring,
The waters never fail:
Still they endure,
And still they flow
For all our Woe
A Sov'reign Cure.

Blest be his wounded Side,
And blest his bleeding Heart,
Who all in Anguish died
Such Favours to impart.
His sacred Blood
Shall make us clean
From ev'ry Sin,
And fit for God.

Finally, Charles Wesley chose this text for one of his Short Hymns on Select Passages.[69] In this case water and blood are combined, corresponding literally to the biblical description of the crucifixion, and they are assigned cleansing power.

By faith I to the fountain fly,
Open'd for all mankind and me,
To purge my sins of deepest die,
My life, and heart's impurity:
From Christ, the smitten Rock, it flows
The purple and the chrystal stream
Pardon and holiness bestows:
And both I gain thro' faith in him.

The Evangelicals used "blood" generally to represent cleansing from sin, and to some extent it was related to the "blood" of the sacrament. Their stress, however, is consistently upon its effect, and there is almost no contemplation of the crucifixion itself and

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[68] Philip Doddridge, Hymns Founded on Various Texts (London, 1755), pp. 151-152.

[69] Charles Wesley, Short Hymns on Select Passages (Bristol, 1762), II, p. 112.

the sufferings of Christ nor concern with the sacrificial aspect of the atonement. In many examples, "blood" seems to have lost the concrete literal sense of human blood and has become part of the biblical jargon which found such easy expression in their hymns and writing generally. The Rev. Mr. Thomas Scott, friend of Cowper and Rector of nearby Aston Sandford, could say, "In general, I enjoy an established peace of conscience, through the blood of sprinkling...."[70] with as much ease as if he were referring to water. And William Romaine used it in much the same way: "Here is the fountain of all joy. From hence flows peace with God, and love to God with every blessing of his love. All comes through the bleeding lamb, and is the fruit of his cross and passion".[71]

Cowper frequently used the metaphor of blood in the Olney Hymns to indicate cleansing from sin, but unlike his fellow Evangelicals, he also tends to emphasise the use of blood as a sacrifice to pacify God's thirst for vengeance. "The paschal sacrifice,/And blood-besprinkled door" of Exodus xxii. 13 teaches "the need of other blood,/To reconcile an angry God".[72] The same reference to the slaying of the passover lamb occurs in Cowper's "Prayer For Children".

> When the angel of the Lord
> Drawing forth his dreadful sword,
> Slew with an avenging hand,
> All the first-born of the land: [Exodus xii. 12]
> Then thy people's doors he pass'd,
> Where the bloody sign was plac'd;
> Hear us, now upon our knees
> Plead the blood of Christ for these!

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[70] Thomas Scott, The Force of Truth (Edinburgh, 1821), pp. 77-78. Cowper helped Scott editorially in writing this.

[71] William Romaine, p. 36.

[72] "Old Testament Gospel", (Bk. I. cxxxii).

Whenever Cowper uses "blood", whether drawn from the Old or the New Testament, it is referred to Christ's passion, and usually its two-fold effects of cleansing the sinner from his sin and pacifying the anger of God or "the law".

Related to this use of "blood" is the extension of the same connotations to ritual cleansing with water. At times it is difficult to determine whether it is blood or water which is the cleansing agent. "My grace, a flowing stream, proceeds /To wash your filthiness away"[73] can be seen as water, but grace is more frequently related to blood, especially within the context of cleansing as seen in "Self-Acquaintance": "Oh, cleanse me in a Saviour's blood".[74] When related to the thirst of the soul for salvation, however, the metaphor refers more definitely to water, a traditional symbol for spiritual blessing. "Wells of free salvation yield/ Streams of life, a plenteous store,/And my soul shall thirst no more".[75] In "My Soul Thirsteth for God", Cowper combines the element of the streams of life with the fountain image.

> I want that grace that springs from thee,
> That quickens all things where it flows;
> And makes a wretched thorn, like me
> Bloom as the myrtle, or the rose.
> Dear fountain of delight unknown!
> No longer sink below the brim;
> But overflow, and pour me down
> A living, and life-giving stream!

The Old Testament repeatedly uses the metaphor of a fountain

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[73] "The Covenant", (Bk. I. lxxi).

[74] "Self-Acquaintance", (Bk. III. xxvi).

[75] "O Lord, I Will Praise Thee", (Bk. I. lviii).

of life or of living water.[76] The most familiar is that of Jeremiah ii. 13: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water". Jesus appropriates the metaphor and applies it to himself in the Gospels; "But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life".[77] It was natural and inevitable that Christians would come to associate this living water with the sacrament or the blood of Christ, the chief means of grace and of salvation. Cowper's use of a fountain of blood, however, though within Evangelical Christian usage, has an element of violence lacking in the hymns written by his contemporaries.

The biblical passage upon which "Praise for the Fountain Opened" is based uses the metaphor of the fountain to show God's willingness to cleanse the sinner. Cowper, by interpreting the text as a reference to the crucifixion, introduces the element of blood.

There is a fountain fill'd with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners, plung'd beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoic'd to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, as vile as he,
Wash'd all my sins away.

Dear dying Lamb, thy precious blood
Shall never lose its pow'r;
Till all the ransom'd church of God
Be sav'd, to sin no more.

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[76] Psalms xxxvi. 9; Proverbs xii. 14; Proverbs xiv. 27; Jeremiah xvii. 13.

[77] John iv. 14. See also Revelation xxi. 6 and xxii. 17.

E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream
   Thy flowing wounds supply;
Redeeming love has been my theme,
   And shall be till I die.

Then in a nobler sweeter song
   I'll sing thy power to save;
When this poor lisping stammering tongue
   Lies silent in the grave.

Lord, I believe thou has prepar'd
   (Unworthy tho' I be)
For me a blood-bought free reward,
   A golden harp for me!

'Tis strung, and tun'd, for endless years,
   And form'd by pow'r divine;
To sound in God the Father's ears,
   No other name but thine.

The first four lines state the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy in Christ; the cleansing fountain is now open. The next two turn to the crucifixion itself and its efficacy for the thief as an illustration of the theme. Cowper then applies it personally and contemporaneously. As it was open for the dying thief, so it flows for him today. Verse three extends and generalises the theme. The fountain will be efficacious until all the church is redeemed. The first three stanzas are objective; in the remaining four, he applies his affirmation to himself. Speaking as the poet, or sweet singer, he expresses his gratitude as an eternal personal concert for God the Father. The development is well controlled; the personal application and final surge of joy and assurance at the end free the basic image from morbidity.

The first two stanzas and the fifth are the most effective. The verbs are again the strength of his lines. The blood is "drawn" from Emmanuel's veins. Sinners are "plung'd" beneath the fountain which is so abundant it is described as a flood. "Plung'd" is richly

ambiguous in context. The sinner who is by definition "lost" is drowned beneath the flood which gives life and salvation. The verb is passive and thereby indicates the Reform stress on the priority of God's act in the process of salvation. The dying thief of stanza two rejoices in the death which brings to him eternal life. Stanzas three and four are flat and dull. The use of Evangelical jargon is empty, imprecise, and at times - "Dear dying Lamb" - bathetic.

Stanza five builds ironically on the contrast between the death of earthly, mortal speech and the sweeter immortal song of the saved. "When this poor lisping stammering tongue/Lies silent in the grave", shows Cowper using rhythm more effectively than he does elsewhere in the hymn. The two concluding stanzas develop the theme of immortal song, stated in stanza five, rather disastrously. I find the whole image much more offensive than that of the fountain of blood which opened the hymn. It displays a familiarity with the divine which is not adequately prepared for in the hymn. "Free reward", l. 23, is awkward, the speech rhythms of "A golden harp for me!" are ludicrous, and the whole stanza is rather like a child winning a prize at a party. In contrast, the closing stanza of "Retirement", which develops the same theme, is more controlled and more effective. Although this hymn is still included in modern hymnals, the last two stanzas are always omitted.

No other hymn of Cowper's has caused such contradictory critical reactions. Norman Nicholson, one of the most perceptive critics of Cowper, calls it "a superb hymn and a remarkable expression of Evangelical piety at its purest".[78] Another, John Brownlie, accuses

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[78]Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (London, 1951), p. 79.

Cowper, curiously, of being unscriptural. "Its imagery is certainly not Scriptural; and besides it gives a sensuous representation of the sacrifice of our Lord, which one hardly looks for outside the hymns of the mediaeval Latin Church".[79] The most recent discussion of the hymn, by Eric Routley, takes the opposite side. "The only criticism that will stand against this hymn is a criticism not of the hymn but the untheological and uncompassionate age in which we at present live, which makes necessary the careful use of hymns so loaded with theology and so uncompromisingly Scriptural in their language".[80] Nicholson and Routley are certainly right in their assessments of the content of the hymn, but I cannot help but feel it a pity that such a weak hymn of Cowper's has become perhaps the one hymn by which he is most frequently remembered.

Hymns of Conflict and Comfort

Devotion to the words of Scripture resulted in some bad hymns, but Cowper's use of biblical imagery was also the source of much which is good in his hymns. In those hymns which are most personal, especially those he contributed to the section entitled "Conflicts", Cowper forgets the letter of the Bible and transmutes Scripture into personal experience. In these he writes from the heart, the best commentator upon Scripture according to John Newton,[81] and expresses

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[79] John Brownlie, The Hymns and Hymn Writers of the Church Hymnary (London, 1911), p. 142.

[80] Eric Routley, I'll Praise My Maker (London, 1951), p. 96.

[81] John Newton, "A Plan of a Compendious Christian Library", Forty-One Letters on Religious Subjects (London, 1774), Works, I, pp. 69-71.

himself in scriptural language. In these eleven hymns, we generally find Cowper at his most personal, most impassioned, and most appealing to those of us who are not sympathetic to his Evangelicalism. Special attention should be given to four: (1) "God moves in a mysterious way", (2) "The billows swell, the winds are high", (3) "The Saviour hides his face!" and (4) "Lord, who hast suffer'd all for me".

"Light Shining Out of Darkness" ("God moves in a mysterious way") is one of Cowper's most frequently sung hymns in Protestant worship.[82] For his imagery, Cowper draws on nature and the Bible, but more often than has been recognised, his nature is found in Scripture. The first stanza, for example, has been praised often for its power.

> God moves in a mysterious way,
> His wonders to perform;
> He plants his footsteps in the sea,
> And rides upon the storm.

The image of God walking the sea and riding the storm, indicating majesty and grandeur, occurs twice in the Old Testament, in Isaiah xxix. 1 and Psalm civ. 3: "who maketh the clouds his chariot: who

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[82] Published at least three times before 1779 by Toplady in The Gospel Magazine (July, 1774, p. 307), again in the same magazine for December 1777, pp. 557-558, and in his Psalms and Hymns for Public and Private Worship (1776), p. 131. According to Cowper's contemporary biographer, Greatheed, Cowper "conceived some presentment" of the mental collapse of 1773 as it approached, and during a walk by himself in the fields, he composed this hymn.

walketh upon the wings of the wind".[83]

Cowper follows this Blake-like vision of God with a weak and confused stanza.

> Deep in unfathomable mines
> Of never failing skill;
> He treasures up his bright designs,
> And works his sovereign will.

You cannot have "mines" of skill, nor does one usually hoard treasures in a mine. He intends to say that God's ways, which are of great value, are past finding out. Far beyond finite sight and understanding, God makes his plans (the "bright designs") and fulfils them.

Seeing through the storm clouds of the first quatrain, Cowper calls for all to see it is the God of grace who rides the storm. The Bible often associates God with the clouds. In the Old Testament, He often appears in a cloud (Exodus xvi. 10, xix. 9, xxiv. 16, xxxiv. 5; also Luke ix. 35), and it was by a cloud that He led the Children of Israel through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. Considering the arid nature of the country, it was natural for the Hebrews to see God's favour in the dark clouds which brought life-sustaining rain ("his favour is a cloud of the latter rain", Proverbs, xvi. 15).

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[83] Watts had used the same image in his "Heavenly Joy on Earth", (No. 30 in Hymns and Spiritual Songs, Bk. II, 4th stanza):

> The God that rules on high,
> And thunders when he please;
> That rides upon the stormy sky,
> And manages the seas.

Cf. Thomas Bayne, "Isaac Watts and Cowper", N. & Q., 10th Series, II (October, 22nd, 1904), p. 323. See also Pope, "Essay on Man", II, I, 110.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessing on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.

His use of the metaphor of a flower unfolding from bud to full bloom is mixed with that of fruit maturing from bitterness to sweetness, the first and fourth lines developing the metaphor of fruit, the second and third that of the unfolding flower.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding ev'ry hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste, [Isaiah xviii. 5]
But sweet will be the flower.

The metaphor of the bud blossoming and the fruit maturing from sourness to sweetness occurs several times in the Bible, particularly in Isaiah xviii. 5 ("when the bud is perfect, and the sour grape is ripening in the flower ..."), where the two are joined together and used to express the providence of God.

The conclusion and application is more objective, less personal than usual for Cowper.

Blind unbelief is sure to err, John xiii. 7[84]
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

Notable also in this hymn is the wry wit of the conclusion. The entire hymn up to the final lines suggests the discrepancy between God's apparent action or will and what it is in reality. Throughout it appears God's will is something unpleasant to be endured.

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[84] "Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter".

But as God's acts create the "darkness" of the title, so his acts will also "interpret" or fulfil the darkness with "light". Only he can understand his ways.

Much of the strength of this hymn lies in its objective viewing of what God has done and does (verses one and two), and in the way these acts are used as the basis for confidence and trust. As in other hymns, Cowper combines an abstract noun with a concrete adjective ("frowning providence" suggestive of storm clouds) and with a familiar, homely image ("He hides a smiling face"). There is also a breadth of view expressed which one associates more with the hymns of Watts. Here strength of faith, so often lacking in Cowper, enables him to challenge the "fearful saints". His opening lines to each stanza, often determining the success or failure of a hymn when sung, are forceful, almost always placing a stress on an initial monosyllabic word. His verbs are uniformly simple and strong - "plants", "rides", "works", "judge", "trust", "break", "hides", "scan". One of the most popular of his hymns still in use, it is also one of his finest.

"Temptation" ("The billows swell, the winds are high") is thoroughly scriptural in its language, but it is more controlled and developed than most of Cowper's hymns. Drawing primarily upon images of the sea during a storm, one of the more common in Cowper's poetry, he weaves together phrases drawn from all parts of the Bible and blends them into an organic whole.

The billows swell, the winds are high, [Ps. xlii. 7; Jonah ii. 3]
Clouds overcast my wintry sky; [Zech. i. 15; Ps. xviii. 11]
Out of the depths to thee I call [Ps. cxxx. 1]
My fears are great, my strength is small. [Isaiah xxxv. 4]

O Lord, the pilot's part perform [Ezekiel xxvii. 29]

And guide and guard me thro' the storm;
Defend me from each threat'ning ill,
Control the waves, say, "Peace, be still". [Mark iv. 39]

Amidst the roaring of the sea,
My soul still hangs her hope on thee; [Hebrews vi. 19]
Thy constant love, thy faithful care,
Is all that saves me from despair.

Dangers of ev'ry shape and name
Attend the followers of the Lamb,
Who leave the world's deceitful shore,
And leave it to return no more.

Tho' tempest toss'd and half a wreck,
My Saviour thro' the floods I seek; [Ps. xxix. 10]
Let neither winds nor stormy main,
Force back my shatter'd bark again.

Cowper seems to have been especially moved by the story of Jonah, the rebellious prophet whose sin caused the storms he endured and who was finally cast into a raging sea to pacify an angry God. This hymn is one of several poems which Cowper wrote on the theme which was more effectively expressed at the end of his life in "The Castaway". Yet the thought and imagery is a common one in the Bible. One of the best known psalms was the forty-second, and especially the seventh verse: "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me", and Jonah had made the same complaint: "For thou hast cast me into the deep, in the midst of the seas; and the floods compassed me about: all thy billows and thy waves passed over me".

The Psalms are full of images of the sea in storm used to express the writer's suffering under the hands of his enemy or of God. Newton's adventurous life on the high seas made such biblical metaphors especially meaningful to him, and he uses them frequently in his sermons. Cowper's use of imagery drawn from the sea is not surprising; the extent to which it is biblical once again suggests how

thoroughly steeped in the language of Scripture he was.

This hymn gains effectiveness by its simple and sustained imagery. The basic image of the sea in storm is developed simply and directly. Cowper's use of alliteration in line five ("pilot's part perform") and line ten ("hangs her hope"), however, distracts by giving more stress to the words than required. The alliteration of "hangs her hope" is also forced and is further confused by the inevitable recollection of the passage from Hebrews, paraphrased here, which uses the metaphor of an anchor to represent hope. One does not "hang" an anchor. The alliteration in the line which follows ("constant love ... faithful care") is more subtle and lends additional stress where it contributes to the meaning.

"Mourning and Longing" ("The Saviour hides his face!") expresses the dark night of the soul which Christians have experienced in every age, but Cowper's faith seems to have been always wreathed in clouds, storms and darkness. Perhaps because of the immediacy of such religious experiences, his best religious lyrics express conflict, doubt and terror.

The Saviour hides his face!
My spirit thirsts to prove
Renew'd supplies of pard'ning grace,
And never-fading love.

The favour'd souls who know
What glories shine in him,
Pant for his presence, as the roe [Ps. xlii. 1; Canticles viii. 14; ii. 17.]
Pants for the living stream!

What trifles tease me now!
They swarm like summer flies,
They cleave to ev'ry thing I do,
And swim before my eyes.

How dull the sabbath day,
Without the sabbath's Lord!
How toilsome then to sing and pray,
And wait upon the word!

Of all the truths I hear
How few delight my taste!
I glean a berry here and there, [Isaiah xxiv. 7, 13]
And mourn the vintage past.

Yet let me (as I ought)
Still hope to be supply'd;
No pleasure else is worth a thought,
Nor shall I be deny'd.

Tho' I am but a worm, [Job, xxv. 6; Ps. xxii. 6; Isaiah
Unworthy of his care; xli. 14]
The Lord will my desire perform
And grant me all my pray'r.

Here especially the passive character of Cowper's religious belief, which was to increase as he grew older, is expressed. There is also an underlying fear, except in the last verse, of being among those who in the mystery of election were chosen for eternal damnation. To read the hymn as autobiography is to misunderstand it, however. Cowper is expressing a common season in the life of the Christian, and Newton, certainly not usually one who doubted his election, himself wrote hymns similar in anxiety and uncertainty.[85]

The third stanza is one of his best in the Olney Hymns and is often used to show Cowper's early, excellent use of images drawn from nature. But as has been shown with other hymns, this too may have had a biblical source. One of the more memorable plagues brought upon the Egyptians before they released Israel was that of flies and lice; "I will send swarms of flies upon thee, and upon thy servants, and upon thy people, and into thy houses; and the houses of the Egyptians shall be full of swarms of flies, and also the ground whereon they are" (Exodus viii. 21). After this event,

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[85] "Oh that I were as in months past! ..." on Job xxix. 2.

biblical writers refer a number of times to this plague as the punishment which Jehovah sends upon those who disobey him: Psalm lxxviii. 45 and cv. 31, and particularly Isaiah vii. 18 ("The Lord shall hiss for the fly that is in the uttermost part of the rivers of Egypt, and for the bee that is in the land of Assyria. And they shall come, and shall rest all of them in the desolate valleys, and in the holes of the rocks, and upon all thorns, and upon all bushes"). Although the plagues of Egypt would be well enough known to Cowper, if it is the Bible which was the source of the image used here, it is a source so absorbed into his thought, so a part of his everyday living that it is no longer allusive in any strict sense. It speaks immediately to the reader with the vividness of personal experience.

Again his verbs carry the force of his writing. The explicit statement of the problem, "What trifles tease me now!", contains in itself the image which is developed. The smallness of "trifles" suggests the flies, and the partial alliteration with "tease" gives additional stress to the sensation of his personal discomfort. The flies "swarm", "cleave" and "swim", all strong monosyllabic verbs which express the sensation of the distracting flies. "Swarm" conveys the sound as well as the sense; and "cleave" suggests the degree of corruption which has attracted them.

In contrast, the gleaning of berries in the fifth stanza is not developed beyond the suggestions found in Isaiah. The final stanza is trite and redundant. Cowper's frequent reference to himself as a worm in relation to God has ample biblical warrant, but is nonetheless annoying. When Cowper simply accepts a biblical image without

developing it, he appears insensitive to the visual representation. As seen in his use of "blood", he is most prone to do this when the imagery has become a part of Evangelical jargon.

"Prayer for Patience" ("Lord, who hast suffer'd all for me") draws more explicitly on biblical sources but employs them at times more subjectively and personally, transforming them for his own use.

Lord, who has suffer'd all for me,
My peace and pardon to procure;
The lighter cross I bear for thee
Help me with patience to endure.

The storm of loud repining hush, [Mark iv. 39; cf. "Temptation", l. 8]
I would in humble silence mourn;
Why should th' unburnt, tho' burning bush, [Exodus iii. 2]
Be angry as the crackling thorn?

Man should not faint at thy rebuke,
Like Joshua falling on his face, Joshua vii. 10, 11. [v. 6]
When the curst thing that Achan too, [v. 1. 11, 13]
Brought Israel into just disgrace.

Perhaps some golden wedge suppress'd, [v. 21]
Some secret sin offends my God;
Perhaps that Babylonish vest [v. 21]
Self-righteousness, provokes the rod.

Ah! were I buffeted all day, [Matthew xxvii. 29]
Mock'd, crown'd with thorns, and spit upon, [Matthew xxvi. 67]
I yet should have no right to say,
My great distress is mine alone.

Let me not angrily declare
No pain was ever sharp like mine;
Nor murmur at the cross I bear,
But rather weep, rememb'ring thine.

Using Christ's patient endurance of the cross (Hebrews vi. 15) as his example, Cowper draws on Old Testament events for images and for illustrations. Unable of himself to still his "loud repining", he calls on God to "hush" him. Cowper's use of the burning bush subtly distinguishes between the cleansing fire of God which destroys sin (the angry crackling thorn) and trial by fire which leaves the Christ-

ian (the burning unburnt bush) purged and stronger as well as incidentally revealing the presence of God to those who stand by. The sound contrasts between the Christian who accepts the trial, who mourns "in humble silence", and the sinner who rebels in anger "as the crackling thorn" are particularly good. The third and fourth verses (drawn from almost the entire seventh chapter of Joshua) require a detailed knowledge of minor stories of the Old Testament greater than most possess. Although the reader might recall Achan's retention of the golden wedge, the stoning and burning of him and all his family and possessions as punishment, few would remember the "Babylonish vest" only mentioned in Achan's public confession ("When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them", Joshua vii. 21). Cowper realised the obscurity of the passage enough to add a note (although an inaccurate reference) indicating the source.

But the problem is more fundamental. Cowper does nothing with the images from his source. They remain additions to the poem stuck in to illustrate his theme but left undeveloped. "Golden wedge" conveys no clear impression of a sense of sin, and Cowper is forced to spell out the meaning of "Babylonish vest" with an abstraction ("Self-righteousness"). Here his use of images from the Bible is flat and mechanical. With the omission of these stanzas, however, the hymn is rather better.

The two concluding stanzas are more successful. The fifth verse returns to the example of Jesus' suffering and applies it personally. Christ, the innocent one, alone bore the righteous judgment

of God upon himself which men deserved. If the hymn-writer were to experience as much, it would never be so great because he would have Christ present with him. Thus with his attention directed away from himself, perspective is gained and with it the humility he had prayed for at the beginning. Similar to the pattern of Cowper's other hymns which end with prayer, he began with a petition to God - in this case for patience - and at the end has found the answer to his prayer, not in selfish acquisition but by faith in Jesus Christ. In these stanzas, as with the first two, Cowper has passed beyond literal use of biblical imagery to make them organic to the hymn.

Evaluation and Conclusion

According to Gilbert Thomas, Cowper's "best hymns are those in which he voices his love of Nature".[86] So to argue, Thomas must ignore the biblical source of much of his imagery drawn from "nature". Furthermore, there is very little nature imagery used in the Hymns. "Retirement" and "I Will Praise the Lord at All Times" use nature as context within which God confronts man, but the first uses only one image from nature - the nightingale simile - and it is literary as much as natural.

"I Will Praise the Lord at All Times" uses nature not merely as the context of devotion but a stimulus to praise as well. The structure is simple and direct. In the first four verses, the poet reads some characteristic of God's grace from each of the four seasons; in the last two verses, he finds additional emblems in morning and evening. The first two lines of each stanza describe the phenomenon in

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[86]Gilbert Thomas, William Cowper (London, 1948), p. 186,

nature, the last two interpret its meaning.

Winter has a joy for me,
While the Saviour's charms I read,
Lowly, meek, from blemish free,
In the snow-drop's pensive head.

Spring returns, and brings along
Life-invigorating suns:
Hark! the turtle's plaintive song,
Seems to speak his dying grones!

Summer has a thousand charms,
All expressive of his worth;
'Tis his sun that lights and warms,
His the air that cools the earth.

What! has autumn left to say
Nothing, of a Saviour's grace?
Yes, the beams of milder day
Tell me of his smiling face.

Light appears with early dawn,
While the sun makes haste to rise,
See his bleeding beauties, drawn
On the blushes of the skies.

Ev'ning, with a silent pace,
Slowly moving in the west,
Shews an emblem of his grace,
Points to an eternal rest.

The simple, quiet tone is effective. The initial stress in each line gives a firmness and sense of control. The choice of emblems in each season, however, is uneven. The snow-drop conveys the whiteness emblematic of Christ's purity and innocence, the "pensive head" his humility, and the song of the turtle dove a moaning. Both stanzas on summer and autumn, however, are empty and padded out, especially summer's "thousand charms" and the rhetorical question of lines 13 and 14. Cowper appears to have been trapped by alliteration into "See his bleeding beauties, drawn/On the blushes of the skies". "Bleeding beauties" is imprecise, and "blushes" is inappropriate and carries the connotation of rather coy embarrassment.

The final stanza is perfunctory. How does evening show an emblem of his grace? And though evening may imply rest, there is no suggestion of eternity. The first two lines, however, convey the silent slow paced setting of the sun admirably. This hymn may express Cowper's love of nature, but it is hardly one of his more successful.

"Retirement", included in the section entitled "Comforts", was written before Cowper had moved to Olney and, therefore, was probably not intended as a hymn for public worship. Although he uses the most common hymn stanza, it is more a poem than a hymn. "Retirement" is one of the best of the Olney Hymns, but not because it displays a love of nature. Nature is used in the regular Evangelical manner as the context within which man can worship God with fewer carnal and materialistic distractions. Nature is a more solitary place than the city and provides, therefore, a place more friendly to meditation and devotion. It is Cowper's love of God which sends him to nature, not a love of nature which lifts him to God.

Far from the world, O Lord, I flee,
From strife and tumult far;
From scenes, where Satan wages still
His most successful war.

The calm retreat, the silent shade,
With pray'r and praise agree;
And seem by the sweet bounty made,
For those who follow thee.

Stanzas one and two are complementary verses contrasting a place of retreat to the place of successful activity. The inversion of the first foot of line one gives the needed stress to "Far" which is demanded both by the intention of the poem and also by the requirements of the hymn form. The repetition of "far" and "from" in the

second line, with the placement of the verb "flee" at the end of the first line, and the choice of "strife and tumult" with their suggestion of the cacophony of urban sounds, effectively emphasise the noise of the city and his desire for distance from it. "From" gains stress by its repetition again in the third line and moves us into the irony of "success" - Satan's war - which he wages with such clamour. The "s" sounds of lines three and four thereby gain a sinister tone. The two controlling verbs - "flee" and "wages" - forcefully pin the meaning and add strength. Stanza two answers stanza one line for line. "Pray'r and praise" are contrasted with strife and tumult; and if the city is Satan's, the country is God's creation. The regular, smooth rhythms of this stanza are contrasted with the vigour and thrust of the first, and the diction is soft - "calm retreat, the silent shade". Nature as the "sweet bounty" of God is also good.

> There if thy Spirit touch the soul,
> And grace her mean abode;
> Oh with what peace, and joy, and love,
> She communes with her God!

In such a setting with the companionship of God, who ventures to come as a humble guest, true joy and peace may be found. Again the verbs are responsible for the effect. The Spirit may "touch" the soul (gently, without force) and may "grace" (graciously, freely, bringing all things needful) her "mean abode" (the only slight violation of the tone, but it does indicate the humble response of the soul to her visitor). There she "communes" (indicating a simple equality and freedom) "with her God!". And the exclamation point expresses wonder and amazement as well as joy. For such a guest who has brought such joy, song is the only adequate response.

> There like the nightingale she pours

Her solitary lays;
Nor asks a witness of her song,
Nor thirsts for human praise.

There is an amplitude in "she pours" appropriate to the thought, and the two negatives express complete content in his exclusive concern with God and his glory.

The concluding two verses extend the simile of stanza four to include a more direct prayer of praise and thanksgiving.

Author and Guardian of my life,
Sweet source of light divine;
And (all harmonious names in one)
My Saviour; thou art mine!

What thanks I owe to thee, what love
A boundless, endless store;
Shall echo thro' the realms above,
When time shall be no more.

His praise is directed to abstractions, but each is rich with meaning. "Author" and "Guardian" recalls his birth and the hand of Providence upon him throughout his life. But all is summed up in "Saviour" and the fact that he is "my" and "mine", not simply an impersonal deity or far distant Lord, but one who condescends to touch the soul of and to commune with man. To express adequate praise and thanksgiving is beyond the finite limits of time and, therefore, make eternity a necessity for love.

"Retirement" is one of the very few hymns in which Cowper is convincing in his expression of his Evangelical faith. It may be significant that it was written soon after his conversion in the first flush of holy joy.

One of the most striking elements of Cowper's hymns is the intense personal note in them. Only six hymns written by him can be

called impersonal. He could never leave the personal pronouns "I" and "me" out of his hymns. Sometimes he writes four stanzas in an objective manner, but he never fails to apply the truth either to his own heart or to the group "we" or "you". Even the "we" often conveys the feeling of a select few. Some hymns may be autobiographical in origin, but most of the personal expressions have been used to aid those who sing or read to gain a sense of personal identification with the thoughts expressed.

Moreover, the traditional association of the hymn with the book of Psalms may have contributed to this particularly personal tone and expression. The Psalmist ordinarily speaks with the first person pronouns. His analysis of his experiences in life as he attempts to find and serve God expresses his struggles with his enemies and his bewilderment in the face of the inscrutability of God's ways with man. The personal, self-searching, agonised prayers in the Psalms as well as the more public statements of group emotions of praise and thanksgiving find parallel expression in the hymns of Cowper and the other hymn-writers. Since the Psalms were so regularly sung in the Church and were normative expression of human response to God's actions, it is not surprising that Cowper draws so heavily upon them for imagery and so often adopts their personal note.

Some of Cowper's hymns do not conform to the eighteenth century definition of a hymn. Some are more lyrical poems of a sincere man seeking assurance of his acceptance by God. Yet his purpose is essentially indistinguishable from that of other hymn-writers. His feelings are deep and individual at times, and he is too much an artist to be always bound by the necessities of public worship. Some

"are poems of personal doubt and conflict rather than songs of faith and assurance. As poems they are sometimes laboured and flat; at other times they are poignant enough".[87] Their self-consciousness occasionally makes them unsuitable for public singing.

The hymn-books of the eighteenth century, printed like collections of devotional poetry, were intended for the moral improvement of the lower and middle classes. They were guides and aids to devotion for use in private prayer as much as they were intended for public worship. The Evangelical insistence upon the importance of an individual carefully analysing his religious experience regularly not only produced hymns but was encouraged by them. This sort of personal examination kept the believer humbled before God and aware of his dependence upon Him. In these periods set aside for prayer and self-examination, the power of suggestion was important; Cowper's hymns of conflict may have been a result.

When Cowper's hymns are bad, the reason for his failure may sometimes be attributed to a too close dependence upon the literal words of Scripture. At such times, he tends to list biblical incidents or references with little alteration. "For the Poor", a homiletical hymn in the "Comforts" section of Book III, uses texts mechanically and literally adding little beyond an application in the final two stanzas.

When Hagar found the bottle spent,
And wept o'er Ishmael;
A message from the Lord was sent
To guide her to a well.

Genesis xxi. 19 "And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink".

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[87] Thomas, p. 190.

Should not Elijah's cake and cruse
Convince us at this day,
A gracious God will not refuse
Provisions by the way?

His saints and servants shall be fed,
The promise is secure;
"Bread shall be giv'n them," he has said,
"Their water shall be sure."

Repasts far richer they shall prove,
Than all earth's dainties are;
'Tis sweet to taste a Saviour's love,
Tho' in the meanest fare.

To Jesus then your trouble bring,
Nor murmur at your lot;
While you are poor, and he is King,
You shall not be forgot.

I Kings xvii. 14 "For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth".

Isaiah xxxiii. 16 "He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure."

Each of the incidents chosen for illustration is a miracle God provides in situations which appear to be hopeless. He does not directly hold out the hope of a miracle - those were limited to Apostolic times - but they can have a "taste" of that which is much better, the Saviour's love". Somehow Cowper provides rather cold comfort for the poor, and it is especially ungracious when one remembers his dependence upon his friends and relatives to maintain him. Cowper's concern only for the deserving poor is apparent also. The promise to be fed is limited to "His saints and servants".

Other hymns fail because of the tone of arrogance which Cowper adopts when distinguishing between the elect and the dammed. The worst is seen in "The Narrow Way", intended as a "caution".

What thousands never knew the road!
What thousands hate it when 'tis known!
None but the chosen tribes of God,
Will seek or choose it for their own.

A thousand ways in ruin end,
One only leads to joys on high;
By that my willing steps ascend,
Pleas'd with a journey to the sky.

No more I ask, or hope to find,
Delight or happiness below;
Sorrow may well possess the mind
That feeds where thorns and thistles grow.

The joy that fades is not for me,
I seek immortal joys above;
There, glory without end shall be
The bright reward of faith and love.

Cleave to the world ye sordid worms,
Contented lick your native dust;
But God shall fight, with all his storms,
Against the idol of your trust.

Cowper seems to exult in the fact that thousands have never had a chance for salvation and other thousands reject it when they do learn it. There is no humility in stanzas two through four, and in the final stanza he denounces the "sordid worms" with a rather unpleasant relish. He sounds like a small bully with God as his massive big brother. The attitude and tone is not in keeping with the best in Evangelical theology.

In evaluating Cowper's better hymns, one is struck by both the similarities and differences one finds with Herbert's poems. Cowper read Herbert carefully and eagerly in his early Evangelical phase, as he mentions in his Memoir.

> At length I met with Herbert's Poems; and gothic and uncouth as they were, I yet found in them a strain of piety which I could not but admire. This was the only author I had any delight in reading. I pored over him all day long; and though I found not here what I might have found - a cure for my malady, yet it never seemed so much alleviated as while I was reading him.[88]

It is not surprising, therefore, to find echoes of Herbert's poems in the Olney Hymns. The contrasts, however, are even more instructive. Herbert wrote religious lyrics as a part of his own devotional life

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[88] William Cowper, Memoir (London, 1816), pp. 9-10.

and service to God. He was not limited, therefore, by the four kinds of metre used by the hymn nor was he concerned to modify his taste to meet the limitations of a semiliterate congregation. Herbert's poems are conversations with his Saviour and private by their very nature.

When one contrasts Cowper's "Welcome to the Table" with Herbert's "Love" ("Love bade me welcome ..."), both invitations to Holy Communion, the differences become especially manifest. Herbert's lyric breathes humility. The tone is quiet; the speaker's trembling anxiety that he is unworthy is stilled by the words of welcoming love spoken by Christ. Significantly, there is no one present except the Lover and the beloved. The reluctance is that of a lover who is shy being wooed by one more bold. The relationship is tender, and a submerged erotic element lends a note of controlled passion to the invitation and to his final acceptance. Theological statement is buried under personal feeling. And there is an absolute simplicity and control of tone.

In contrast, Cowper's "Welcome to the Table" is, with the exception of the final stanza, a public group expression. The first stanza proclaims the Table open.

> This is the feast of heav'nly wine,
> And God invites to sup;
> The juices of the living vine
> Were press'd to fill the cup.

The structure of the hymn is the same as that found in his other homiletical hymns. Once the theme is stated, the next three stanzas develop the theme, and the final verse applies it with a personal affirmation. Until the final six lines, the hymn is objective and declaratory.

Oh, bless the Saviour, ye that eat,
With royal dainties fed;
Not heav'n affords a costlier treat,
For Jesus is the bread!

The vile, the lost, he calls to them,
Ye trembling souls appear!
The righteous, in their own esteem,
Have no acceptance here.

Approach ye poor, nor dare refuse
The banquet spread for you;
Dear Saviour, this is welcome news,
Then I may venture too.

If guilt and sin afford a plea,
And may obtain a place;
Surely the Lord will welcome me,
And I shall see his face!

Cowper is not subtle and he takes pains to clarify the obvious. His ideas are not embodied in organic images. Instead of seeing and experiencing the anxiety of the reluctant, fearful lover, we are flatly told that "trembling souls" should attend. The speech is consistently from the altar and therefore sounds presumptuous and blatant. The tone, especially of lines nine through fourteen, is strident. The concluding prayer, though more subdued, shows no sense of personal encounter with the loving Saviour so powerfully presented by Herbert. Cowper consistently scatters the effect of a poem by failing to develop an image. "Royal dainties" is a rather insensitive metaphor to describe the communion elements, and to call the Holy Meal a "treat" trivialises it. "Jesus is the bread" is stronger because of its plainness and simplicity. In contrast to Herbert's concrete "guiltie of dust and sinne", Cowper has nothing which conveys estrangement and unworthiness to participate. The "vile" and the "lost" are not meaningful abstractions but an unfeeling use of Evangelical terminology.

Two other poems similar in content are Cowper's "Jehovah Our Righteousness" and Herbert's "The Quip". Both are concerned with the tension in Christian devotion between the aspiration to love and serve God perfectly and the realisation that sin is always present even in the most holy moments. Both resolve the problem by dependence upon the righteousness of Christ imputed to man. Both are prayers. Unlike Herbert, however, Cowper never places words in God's mouth. A distance is always maintained between the sovereign Lord and the lowly creature. The warm intimacy, so characteristic of Herbert's faith, is almost totally lacking in Cowper's. When Cowper does include a speech by God, it always has biblical origins and is rarely other than a direct quotation. Herbert's relationship to God is that of close friends or even lovers. As a result, his holy wit does not violate propriety but indirectly testifies to the warmth and tenderness of the relationship.

In "The Quip", Herbert makes a rather heavy use of personifications (the "merrie world", "Beautie", "Money", "Glorie", "Wit and Conversation"), but they are made visible and audible by simple, quick details. Money comes "chinking" and brave Glorie came "puffing by/In silks that whistled". Finally, although Herbert uses a series of illustrations for his theme, his statement, question, refrain answer, contains and unites them into a satisfying whole.

In contrast, Cowper leaves his personified abstractions generalised. The structure of the hymn is again that of a sermon. The first stanza states the contrast between God's perfect ways and man's

pollution.

> My God, how perfect are thy ways!
> But mine polluted are;
> Sin twines itself about my praise,
> And slides into my pray'r.[89]

The serpent as an image for sin is traditional and biblical, but Cowper uses it with rare skill. In both lines, the verbs are the key to his success. "Twines" and "slides" convey the snake-like quality of sin (its coldness, its repulsiveness, its capacity to intrude into small places), are thoroughly concrete, and escape the flatness of a directly stated simile.

Stanzas two and three continue the development by contrasts. The first two lines of each speak positively of what God has done for him and of the divine desire that grace has given. The concluding two lines answer with the negative reality; self must assert what he has done and impatience, instead of thanksgiving, is his response to God's gift.

> When I would speak what thou has done
> To save me from my sin,
> I cannot make thy mercies known
> But self-applause creeps in.
>
> Divine desire, that holy flame
> Thy grace creates in me;
> Alas! impatience is its name,
> When it returns to thee.

He insists on packing in many details which are related abstractly to his thought; he fails, except in lines three and four, to think sensuously through his images. The results are sometimes grotesque:

> This heart, a fountain of vile thoughts,
> How does it overflow?
> While self upon the surface floats
> Still bubbling from below.

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[89] Cf. "Progress of Error", ll. 4-8.

The final stanza is an assertion rather than a statement of realised faith.

> Let others in the gaudy dress
> Of fancied merit shine;
> The Lord shall be my righteousness;
> The Lord for ever mine.

How flat and disappointing is Cowper's "gaudy dress of fancied merit" in contrast to Herbert's "Glorie"! The absence of an intimate relationship with God makes the final two lines presumptuous.

Cowper's "Self-Acquaintance", on the same theme, also makes heavy use of personified abstractions ("Legality", "Presumption", "Discontent", "Unbelief" and "Thoughts"), but none is individualised or developed to any extent. Again we find the usual structure, theme stated in stanza one, illustrations expand it, and a prayer of petition concludes the hymn. The mixture of metaphors in the last verse indicates Cowper's failure to visualise what he is saying and his substitution of Evangelical jargon for thought. Scriptural language has lost both its literal meaning and the power to create new verbal insights.

> 2 There fiery seeds of anger lurk,
> Which often hurt my frame;
> And wait but for the tempter's work,
> To fan them into flame.
>
> 3 Legality holds out a bribe
> To purchase life from thee;
> And discontent would fain prescribe
> How thou shalt deal with me.
>
> 4 While unbelief withstands thy grace,
> And puts the mercy by;
> Presumption, with a brow of brass,
> Says, "Give me, or I die".

In contrast to Herbert, Cowper regularly fails to embody his thoughts in sustained and developed imagery which conveys powerfully

the religious experiences he describes. Cowper loses himself in a welter of images drawn from the Bible which he fails to relate organically. The unity and simplicity of Herbert in tone and in development is rarely found in Cowper. The tension and anxiety revealed in his hymns suggest a lack of genuine faith when compared with the trust and love which bring rest and peace found to such a marked degree in Herbert.

Cowper was acquainted with some of the hymns of the Wesleys and Watts since the Madan collection which he used daily was drawn largely from them. Cowper is like Watts in his use of biblical imagery. He retains the simplicity of Watts, and like Watts, he depends rather heavily on the Psalms for his imagery drawn from nature. In the hymns in which Cowper is most strikingly successful, however, he has used more the manner of the Wesleys than of Watts.

> Cowper had little of Wesley's superb technical virtuosity and nothing at all of his uninhibited fervour. He was shy and diffident, and even when he joined in what one might call the mass enthusiasms of the Evangelicals, he never quite merged his emotions with those of the others. Yet, like Wesley, he was able to bridge the gap between the devotional poem (the personal expression of a personal feeling) and the hymn. He did this, as Wesley did, by expressing the emotion so that it could be shared by the congregation, each one of whom associated himself with the 'I' of the hymn. This is the more remarkable since he did not deal with the stock emotions of the Revival.[90]

The hymn, though a marginal or subliterary genre, had by the eighteenth century developed as clearly defined formal requirements as the more traditional "kinds". Only four sorts of metre were to be used, it must be adaptable to a limited number of tunes, the diction must be plain and simple, and imagery, if used at all, should

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[90]Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (London, 1951), p. 71.

be drawn in so far as possible from the Bible. Though the hymn must always be praise to God, it might be individual praise as well as more general, but the more personal expressions of religious emotion should be adaptable for group expression. Cowper generally wrote within these limits.

Cowper shows little metrical variety and even less variation in his rhymes. The stanza patterns which he uses have no relationship to the ode or other more strictly literary forms. All conform to the four kinds of metre to which Watts limited himself and to the earlier metrical paraphrases of the Psalms. Fifty-six of the hymns follow ordinary common metre or traditional variations from it. Most common (29 hymns) is his use of the 8686 stanza with an abab rhyme scheme. Twenty-one are 8888. The remaining nine hymns tend to become eight line stanzas with six, seven or eight syllables to the line. The rhyme schemes are simple: 48 are rhymed abab; 8 are aabb; 7 are ababcdcd; and 2 are aabbccdd. The lack of variation in metre and rhyme is dictated by the simple tunes to which the hymns were sung. No matter how effective subtle variations in metre are in poetry, they can make a hymn unsingable when set to a four-square ballad tune. Hymns, one is constantly reminded, are good only when they can be sung to the limited number of tunes known by a musically untrained congregation.

Finally, what do the hymns Cowper wrote from the Olney collection mean in terms of his development as a poet? They were certainly an outlet for his religious feelings and emotions. Here he could channel both his exultation and his depression into an acceptable form and thereby objectify them and gain release. Hymns were the

only poetry which he apparently read during this period. It was natural for him to use this as an outlet for any creative urge he may have felt. Here was a reason and a form at hand. He had written some before. Rather than bury his talent, he could put it into the service of his new Master. It allowed him for the first time to write a substantial number of poems of a more than passing character, poems which would be read and sung by those whom he most wished to impress. Until now he had written in odd moments, without purpose and without much concentration. Here he could stretch his wings.

His hymns gave him practice in writing in a simple form, closely governed by the demands of his audience and the tunes to which they would be sung. Because of the humble congregation for whose use they were designed, Cowper was forced to use a vocabulary which was readily understood and imagery which was close to their lives and the Book which they read. Here rather than in any literary movement we must look for the reason for his simple diction and his use of commonplace objects and events for his imagery. And the writing of hymns must have impressed upon him the concept of poetry as a means of edification.

CHAPTER IV

THE GRAVER STYLE: COWPER'S MORAL SATIRES

> Pity religion has so seldom found
> A skilful guide into poetic ground![1]

Cowper himself was surprised when in 1781 he discovered he had written enough lines of poetry to make it worth while to seek a publisher. When he began to write the long didactic poems which make up the bulk of his first volume, he was nearly fifty years of age. Until that time, although he had translated Horace with friends while at the Inner Temple and had helped Newton with the Olney Hymns, Cowper had not seriously thought of himself as a writer of poetry. He had not begun with any sense of mission; he began to write poetry as a means of distracting his mind from darker thoughts.

After his mental collapse of 1773, his recovery had been slow. Under the care and friendship of John Newton and Mary Unwin, he did gradually return to a state of emotional balance which to all outward appearances was cheerful. Yet he appears never to have been free at any time from melancholy thoughts on his eternal damnation. Like a nervous child with a partially healed wound, Cowper constantly picked at the scab until the blood ran again. Anything, therefore, which would distract his mind was desirable.

As soon as he became capable of action, he made cupboards, boxes and stools for Mary Unwin. Then he turned to gardening and drawing, but when the drawing injured his eyes, he renounced it and "commenced

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[1] "Table Talk", 716-717.

poet".[2] As a school-boy at Westminster, he had written some poetry.[3] Here, it seems, he found an adequate distraction for the winter months.

> At this season of the year, and in this gloomy uncomfortable climate, it is no easy matter for the owner of a mind like mine to divert it from sad subjects, and fix it upon such as may administer to its amusements. Poetry, above all things, is useful to me in this respect. While I am held in pursuit of pretty images, or a pretty way of expressing them, I forget every thing that is irksome, and, like a boy that plays truant, determine to avail myself of the present opportunity to be amused, and to put by the disagreeable recollection that I must, after all, go home and be whipped again.[4]

The exact stimulus which started Cowper writing the satires has been a matter of dispute. Professor Hartley has argued that the encouragement Cowper gained from the publication of Anti-Thelyphthora rather than a suggestion by Mrs. Unwin probably set him to work on "The Progress of Error".[5] Cowper's cousin, the Rev. Martin Madan, had published two volumes of his Thelyphthora or, a Treatise on Female Ruin, considered on the Basis of Divine Love on 31 May 1780, a third volume appearing in 1781, in which he argues for polygamy as a solution to the evils of prostitution and appeals to the practice of the Old Testament patriarchs for support. Madan, converted under the preaching of John Wesley, was a highly respected Evangelical and chaplain to the Lock Hospital. He it was who had helped Cowper following

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[2]To Lady Hesketh, 12 October, 1785; E. V. Lucas, A Selection from Cowper's Letters (London: Oxford University Press, 1911), p. 209.

[3]
> At Westminster, where little poets strive
> To set a distich upon six and five,
> Where discipline helps op'ning buds of sense,
> And makes his pupils proud with silver pence,
> I was a poet too ... ("Table Talk", 506-510)

[4]Letters, I, p. 249

[5]Lodwick Hartley, "Cowper and the Polygamus Parson", Modern Language Quarterly, xvi (1955), pp. 137-141.

his suicide attempt while in the Temple. Newton, now Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London, had tried to dissuade Madan from publishing his eccentric views but had failed. He was particularly concerned for the loss of Madan's effectiveness as a spokesman for Evangelicalism and for the disrepute this would unavoidably cast on their cause. Cowper had written "The Doves" (published in 1782 with the first stanza which identified Madan omitted) and "Love Abused. The Thought Suggested by Thelyphthora" for Newton. Newton, therefore, urged Cowper to write a more extensive answer. He refused, however, for he lacked the necessary knowledge of Hebrew and because of his cousin's kindness to him in trouble.[6] In October, however, a review of Madan's book by Samuel Badcock appeared in the Monthly Review and aroused Cowper to writing. The result was Anti-Thelyphthora. A Tale in Verse, published by Joseph Johnson, Newton's publisher and the firm which had issued the Olney Hymns. Published anonymously, Cowper scrupulously avoided any public criticism of his cousin which could be identified with himself as author. Anti-Thelyphthora was a "modest success" and appears to have encouraged Cowper to write "The Progress of Error", a longer and more general satire.[7] A number of veiled references to Madan's Thelyphthora occur in the satire (see especially ll. 431-436 and 444-459), but Cowper cancelled the major passage attacking Madan and substituted one on Lord Chesterfield instead before the poem was published under his name.[8]

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[6] Letters, I, p. 215.

[7] Norma Russell, A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837 (1963), pp. 33-34.

[8] Letters, I, p. 280 and 290.

"The Progress of Error", written during the autumn months of 1780 and completed in December of that year, is the most Evangelical of the satires and the least successful as a piece of poetry. A loosely organised attack on the common abuses of the day, it is for the most part a dull sermon. To use Cowper's own words, it is a "clear harangue, and cold as it is clear, [and] Falls soporific on the listless ear".[9]

The Evangelical Poet

Once through the first poem, Cowper turned his mind to consider what he was doing and to what purpose. Significantly he placed "Table Talk" first in the volume of poetry which announced him to the world he had left behind. "If you are of my mind", Cowper wrote to Newton,

> I think Table Talk will be the best to begin with, as the subjects of it are perhaps more popular; and one would wish, at first setting out, to catch the public by the ear, and hold them by it as fast as possible, that they may be willing to hear one on a second and a third occasion.[10]

But it does much more than catch the public by the ear. It is, in fact, Cowper's manifesto as an Evangelical poet. To his cousin, Lady Hesketh, Cowper described the first volume of his poetry as "a confession of my faith", an accurate description both in regard to its Evangelicalism and to his self-understanding as a poet.[11] "Table Talk" is essentially an introduction to the first volume and states forthrightly Cowper's aims and ideals. It presents the themes which

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[9] "The Progress of Error", 19-20.

[10] Letters, I, p. 281.

[11] Ibid., II, p. 426.

are developed in later satires, and it concludes with Cowper's clearest and most complete discussion of the qualifications of a poet and the qualities of great poetry as seen from within the context of Evangelicalism. "Table Talk" allows Cowper to argue for his own poetry as worthy of the attention of a wider world than Olney.

"Table Talk" is, as its name suggests, a discussion between two friends around the general topic of what best constitutes the subject matter of poetry. The model for the satire is Horace and Pope's Moral Essays. The reader joins "A" and "B" in the middle of their discussion. Following the pattern of Horatian satire, the organisation is loose and digressive. The discussion moves from the praise of kings to liberty as subject matter for the poet. Following the conventional praise for Chatham, "B" demonstrates the use of poetry as a means of calling for national repentance and righteousness.

England as a nation has forgotten God. In the past, God had been their defence; now her people

> ...trust in navies, and their navies fail -
> God's curse can cast away ten thousand sail!
> They trust in armies, and their courage dies;
> In wisdom, wealth, in fortune, and in lies;
> But all they trust in withers, as it must,
> When he commands, in whom they place no trust. (466-471)

"A" interrupts this tirade to inquire if "B" is prophesying or preaching, and thereby turns the discussion to the nature of the poet, his function, and of poetry itself. "B" calls for Evangelical poetry and a poet who can celebrate the highest themes.

For him the highest and most proper subject matter for poetry is God, and the purpose of poetry is the praise of God.

> The gift, whose office is the Giver's praise,

To trace him in his word, his works, his ways. (750-751)

The poet is to trace God in Holy Scripture, recognise His hand in his created world, and draw out from history the lesson of God's providential care for and testing of the faithful and his judgment upon the wicked. He should speak to the human heart before which he spreads "the rich discov'ry" and invites "mankind to share in the divine delight".[12]

There have been in every age, however, those who "profan'd the sacred wires" through luxury, drunkenness, and sensuality.[13] Among the Ancients, Anacreon and Horace (whom he later praises for his virtue), and among more recent writers, the bawdy poets of the court of Charles II perverted poetry and stimulated lust. The Puritans were partly to blame for the extremes of the Restoration poets. They had drawn the Christian face "without the smile, the sweetness, or the grace", and it was an age void of taste.[14] In reaction, the Restoration poets went to the opposite extreme and "debauch'd their age".[15]

They were followed by the moral satirists, particularly Addison, Pope, Arbuthnot and Swift, who

> Whipp'd out of sight, with satire just and keen,
> The puppy pack that had defil'd the scene. (640-641)

Since then, no poet of stature - with the possible exception of Churchill - had appeared. Many - "ten thousand little throats" - were writing lyrics, but no one living could pretend to the title of a great poet. The abuses of poetry were everywhere to be seen.

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[12]"Table Talk", 752-753. [13]Ibid., 607. [14]Ibid., 615-619.
[15]Ibid., 631.

Many wrote with skill and grace but on trivial themes ("A soldier's feather, or a lady's glove") producing only "whipt-cream".[16] Others wrote from a poor motive, to see their names in print, or from an evil one, to stimulate immoral thoughts and actions. Cowper complains "Whate'er we write, we bring forth nothing new".[17] Satire has done the best it can, and ribaldry its worst; fancy has wasted all its powers on trifles.[18] The need for a serious poet is, therefore, great indeed.

"A" scornfully asks if Sternhold and Hopkins, the versifiers of the Psalms, are examples of such a poet. "B" retorts, "One madrigal of their's" is worth all the poetry of Butler, Prior and Pope.[19] Cowper is not saying Sternhold and Hopkins are better poetic craftsmen than Pope and Prior; but he is arguing for the primacy of a religious subject - i.e. the Gospel - over the most polished poem on a lesser theme. Pope, although Cowper praises him for giving virtue and morality a grace, misapplied his gifts in "acrimony, slander, and abuse"; therefore, one paraphrase of Sternhold and Hopkins is worth all he did, since the Psalter is poetry on the highest subject used for the highest purpose.[20] "A" rightly complains that such a criterion would "sadly thin the ranks of the poetic tribe", but Cowper concludes that nothing essential would be lost if all secular poets were forgotten.[21]

Underlying Cowper's stern view of poetry here outlined is his admiration for the poetry of the Old Testament prophets who proclaimed God's will for and judgments upon the people of Israel. Throughout his discussion of the great poet, he stresses the qualities of pro-

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[16] "Table Talk", 549 and 551. [17] Ibid., 733. [18] Ibid., 728-730.
[19] Ibid., 777. [20] Ibid., 762. [21] Ibid., 767-771.

phetic power and insight. When "A" asks if "B" intends to prophesy or preach, "B" answers with a sketch of his view of the poet as prophet.

> 'Twere new indeed to see a bard all fire,
> Touch'd with a coal from heav'n, assume the lyre,
> And tell the world, still kindling as he sung,
> With more than mortal music on his tongue,
> That He, who died below, and reigns above,
> Inspires the song, and that his name is love. (734-739)

Behind this view of the poet lies the familiar visionary calling of the prophet Isaiah.[22] Cowper wishes to be a poet in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament.

The tradition of the poet as prophet is not simply biblical, however. According to Professor Fairchild, "This idea comes straight from the theory of sacred poetry championed by those picus survivors of the seventeenth century, Dennis, Watts, and Blackmore".[23] He traces the tradition back through Milton and Cowley to the sixteenth century and to Plato. "It is a Platonic-Renaissance doctrine preserved by learned puritans who wished to regard poetry in a religious light".[24] As will be seen, however, Cowper's orientation is more biblical than Platonic.

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[22] In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple.... And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven". And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me'. Isaiah vi. 1-8.

[23] Hoxie Neale Fairchild, Religious, I, pp. 539-540.

[24] Ibid., p. 540.

The prophetic poet is more sensitive than the ordinary man and when inspired by the muse (the Holy Spirit for Cowper) he writes with a force and zeal "that others never feel".[25] From this special sensitivity, gained from his vision of God and his special commission, he has a tender sympathy for human woes.

> If human woes her soft attention claim,
> A tender sympathy pervades the frame,
> She pours a sensibility divine,
> Along the nerve of ev'ry feeling line. (484-487)

But when confronted by man's sin, the prophetic poet responds with angry denunciations against injustice, creating such a storm of music, that it "shakes th' astonish'd crowd".[26] Finally, he has a "terrible sagacity" which informs his "heart" and is thereby enabled to see distant storms;

> He hears the thunder ere the tempest low'rs;
> And, arm'd with strength surpassing human pow'rs,
> Siezes events as yet unknown to man,
> And darts his soul into the dawning plan. (496-499)

Appealing to the classics, "B" points out that in Latin the word for prophet and for poet are the same, and in Britain also poets shared the priesthood "and ev'ry hallow'd druid was a bard".[27]

A prophet is primarily a spokesman through whom God expresses his will. He is by nature a passive instrument manipulated by the divine, and therefore, not a maker in the classical sense. He is governed entirely by his theme, and he is successful only in so far as he is obedient to divine dictation. Thus Cowper can insist that before man's disobedience, "poetry was not an art".[28] Language, or poetry, was above teaching, or

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[25] "Table Talk", 483. [26] Ibid., 491. [27] Ibid., 502-503.
[28] Ibid., 585.

if taught
Only by gratitude and glowing thought,
Elegant as simplicity, and warm
As ecstasy, unmanacled by form,
. . .
Was natural as is the flowing stream,
And yet magnificent - a God the theme! (586-589, 592-593)

So moved, and speaking with an inspired tongue, he reaches the hearts of his hearers and moves them to moral reformation.

The great poet Cowper describes is an Evangelical in the lineage of Milton. We have seen that he is a prophet, more sensitive than ordinary men to human suffering and to human injustice. He must also sing so well that he moves his hearers to moral action, or obedience to the revealed will of God. He is not a solitary singer, or a writer for a sect or party. His message is for all men, so he must speak to be understood by all. He need not, however, be involved in worldly activity. He may gain perspective by retiring to the country, where he may trace God in his handiwork.

Most important of all, he must be a man of Evangelical faith and zeal. Like Isaiah, his lips must be touched by the divine coal from off the altar. Inspired by more than mortal music - the Gospel - he "seeks to delight that he may mend mankind". Virtue alone without Christian faith is not enough. His faith is simple and sincere; he must speak from his heart of what has been given to him, to the hearts of other men. His statements will be personal, therefore, and his knowledge experimental as is his faith.

Though Cowper disclaims realisation of the prophetic ideal in himself,

But no prophetic fires to me belong;
I play with syllables, and sport with song, (504-505)

he does shape his own poetry upon the pattern he presents in "Table

Talk". The satires which followed "Table Talk" are prophetic sermons denouncing sin and calling the people of England to repentance and obedience. "The Progress of Error" is largely a systematic catalogue of the most common evils. "Expostulation", a Jeremiad self-consciously adopting the passionate anger of the Old Testament prophet, exhorts the people to national repentance. "Truth", "Hope" and "Charity" present a positive call to righteousness and faith in God. The only pieces which fall outside this framework are "Conversation", though more than half the poem is concerned with religious discourse, and "Retirement", which has its sermons too.

"Truth"

In presenting the confession of his faith, Cowper chose the three traditional Pauline virtues - faith, hope and charity - and developed them in Evangelical terms. "Truth", or Evangelical faith, written during late December 1780 and completed in January 1781, is more a sermon than a satire. Cowper himself recognised its limited appeal and the probability that it would offend those who held other views of the Christian faith. "With respect to the poem called "Truth", he wrote to John Newton, "it can hardly fail of giving offence to an unenlightened reader".[29] However, his use of satirical "characters" to illustrate his sermon produced some of the more memorable verse in the first volume.

"Truth" opens with a picture of man lost in error (the sea in storm) who fancies he sees land, but on arriving finds it only fog, enters it, dies, and "reads his sentence at the flames of hell".

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[29] Letters, I, p. 289.

Thus the theme, or text, is stated: Man is "weighed in the balance" (Pensantur trutina. - Horace, Lib. ii, Epistle i) and is "found wanting" (Daniel v. 27).

The rather grim opening establishes the tone for much of the poem. Evangelical theology is rather thumpingly forced down the reader's throat. The Gospel though simple is easily rejected or perverted. To make certain his point is clear, Cowper lists the more common sins through some rather effective "characters": a Christian hermit (compared unfavourably with a Muslim), a modern pharisee (the best lines in the poem, 131-164), the cheerless saint, and Tom the hireling contrasted with Charles the faithful servant. Less successfully, he follows these negative portraits with a picture of a true saint who recognises his sinfulness and his inability to help himself.

> The remedy you want I freely give:
> The book shall teach you - read, believe, and live!
> 'Tis done - the raging storm is heard no more,
> Mercy receives him on her peaceful shore;
> And Justice, guardian of the dread command,
> Drops the red vengeance from his willing hand. (273-278)

Neither learning nor wealth can secure God's grace. Voltaire is contrasted unfavourably with a peasant who believes, happy and hopeful in her faith. Though it is more difficult for the proud rich to learn dependence upon God than for the humbled poor, there are wealthy men whom Cowper includes among the elect (John Thornton and Lord Dartmouth, both Evangelicals).

What then is man? The proud portrait men draw contrasts sharply with the picture of man as he is - "a worm". Man's pride is humbled and God's grace is exalted. The Last Trumpet sounds, and the elect stand joyfully before their redeemer, "And faith receives the prize".

"Hope"

"Hope" and "Charity" were written in swift succession, in May, June and July of 1781. "Hope", in many ways a continuation of "Truth", presents a variety of answers to the question, "What is the end of human life?" First, an old sage gives the answer of the stoic. "Lothario", or youth, sees life as the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. "Jonquil", a rake, discovers he has pursued dissipation only to find it boring, but such preaching as the poet proposed on the text of vanity was the greatest vanity of all.

The remedy for all lies in hope. Life is God's gift and all good things necessary for it, and man was designed as an eternal companion for God. Everywhere in nature God has placed indications of his attributes - wisdom, goodness, power and love.

> Nature, employ'd in her allotted place,
> Is handmaid to the purposes of grace. (145-146)

However, it is in Scripture that everything is made clear for all to see. By seeing nature aright and by proper reading of the Bible, hope is born.

Cowper then describes the qualities of hope. Hope condemns the material world as vanity and lifts us to heavenly joys. Hope is an anchor which holds the Christian fast in times of storm. Hope is man's resource when he despairs in sin. The ages of man, by nature a rebel, are traced from baby to school-boy to an adult and finally to death. Some men are misled by false hopes and fail to distinguish the right way. To illustrate, Cowper inserts a parable concerning Ethelred whose house was placed at the meeting of six roads, who though generous, would show his hospitality only to those who came on the one road he had chosen. Those who refuse to come by this road,

the way of unmerited grace, have no grounds for complaint. To illustrate the reaction to God's conditions, Cowper creates a theological discussion between "Vinoso", the "Colonel", and "Ensign", and "Sir Smug" in the local inn. "Sir Smug" concludes the discussion by saying, "That Truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where". Yet everywhere man turns, there is convincing evidence; but above all is scriptural preaching. Even the unpleasant areas of the world are now hearing the Gospel. Cowper praises the Moravian missionaries sent by Germany to Greenland. There the people have nothing, yet they are to be envied since they have the Gospel preached to them. By nature they were savages and heathen; now they are among God's chosen.

Is grace given only in exotic places? No, England has its saints ("Leuconomus"), but Whitefield was abused by the masses of people. Cowper writes a brief eulogy of Whitefield. The casuist may always try to find justification for pleasure-seeking and others too will try to find other ways to salvation, but only those who respond to grace will be received.

> ...folly ends where genuine hope begins,
> And he that finds his heav'n must lose his sins. (637-638)

The natural man is opposed to grace and tries to gain salvation without giving up his sin. When unmerited grace approaches, war begins. Bigotry pretends zeal but only spits in the true Christian's face.

Cowper concludes, after invoking the Holy Spirit to give him special help, with a portrait of an Evangelical conversion experience. He describes man asleep and lost in sin, his awakening to a sense of sin and his subsequent despair, and finally his joyous acceptance of the good news of salvation. The closing paragraphs express his envy

of the preacher who does not need to write poetry but has only to proclaim simply the Gospel.

"Charity"

With "Charity" Cowper completes his discussion of Evangelical truth. In the first half of the poem, Charity is discussed primarily in terms of human relationships grounded in the analogy of God's love for men. Three links bind men together: They have a common father in Adam, commerce and trade makes them interdependent, and charity is a command of God. The remaining half of the poem is concerned with the relation of charity to truth. He takes pleasure in the success of the new science and its discoveries, for truth is a good in itself. But not all truth is divine. New knowledge, however good, does not lead to salvation. Only revelation shows man his sinfulness and points to his saviour. Only divine truth, therefore, will produce charity as its fruit.

This does not mean that divine truth is esoteric. (The Evangelicals were commonly charged with making divine truth their exclusive possession.) As natural blindness, however, cannot apprehend things seen, so spiritual blindness cannot understand what is spiritually perceived. For the sake of the unenlightened, therefore, Cowper describes true Christian charity (a rough paraphrase of I Corinthians xiii) and attempts a portrait of the ideal Christian. To enforce his view that charity must be unselfish in its motivation, he includes two "characters", "Flavia", who believes charity will cover a multitude of sins, and the "Squire", who gives conspicuously but not sacrificially from his abundance.

After discussing the problem of satire in relation to charity, Cowper praises the eternal nature of Christian charity. As we contemplate the Cross, the expression of God's love to us, our love will grow. And like Christ, the Christian must show universal love to men. Since there is a lack of love in the churches, in public life in the state, and in the press, he calls for a general reform. He concludes the poem by stating his attempt to win men to truth by his art. If he has failed, his art is inadequate, not the truth to which he witnesses.

"Truth", "Hope" and "Charity" provide a fair summary of Evangelical doctrine. The sinfulness of man is consistently emphasised. His inability to do anything of himself to improve his lot combined with the hyper-Calvinistic limitation of grace to an elect few results in the continuously sombre outlook on life and history which Cowper maintains. Nothing is to be expected in this world and nothing in the world to come except for the chosen few. Hope for man lies only in the confession of his sinful pride, his acknowledging dependence upon God's grace alone, and his living in charity with his neighbour.

"Expostulation"

"Expostulation", written during the winter months of February and March, 1781, is primarily a call to national repentance and righteousness. A prophetic poem, it calls the nation to righteousness and warns of wrath to come. Here Cowper assumes the prophetic mantle, adopts the passionate anger of an Old Testament prophet, and exhorts the people to repentance. He deviates little from the plan for the poem which he outlined in a letter to Newton in late February

1781.

> Notwithstanding my purpose to shake hands with the Muse and take my leave of her for the present, we have already had a tete-a-tete, since I sent you the last production "Truth". I am as much, or rather more pleased with my new plan, than with any of the foregoing. I mean to give a short summary of the Jewish story, the miraculous interposition in behalf of that people, the great privileges, their abuse of them, and their consequent destruction; and then by way of comparison, such another display of the favours vouchsafed to this country, the similar gratitude with which they have requited them, and the punishment they have therefore reason to expect, unless reformation interpose to prevent it.[30]

"Why weeps the muse for England?", he begins. Because she has turned from Gospel light to the darkness of sin. Superficially all appears well, but those who know Evangelical truth weep for her. Cowper, following the example of Jeremiah, expresses his concern. He traces the history of God's dealings with his chosen people, the Jews, especially at the time of Jeremiah, through the time of Jesus Christ. From this outline of history he draws conclusions worked out in parallel statements, "Their freedom", "Their title", "Their host","Their very garments", "Their leader", "Their God", "Their name", and the use of frame questions. Bemoaning their fall, he calls Britain to learn from their example and to repent.

Next he lists England's troubles. She has lost the American colonies - her own children turn against her. In battle after battle England has been defeated. Parliament does little but break into factions and squabble. God, however, is Lord of history, and nations shall do his will willingly or unwillingly. The concluding half of the poem is constructed by means of parallel charges and questions. "Stand now, and judge yourself" - "Hast thou claimed all

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[30] Letters, I, pp. 276-277.

the glory", "Hast thou not learn'd", "Hast thou" persevered in evil though warned, "Hast thou" tolerated homosexuality in your midst, and are not your clergy gone astray? By reviewing the history of England from Anglo-Saxon times to the present, he answers the questions. The second charge follows: "Kneel now, and lay thy forehead in the dust". A list of God's goodness to England follows: God protected her from the Spanish Armada, from the Scots in 1745, and has given to her the gift of true freedom. The third charge follows logically: "Now think" of your great debt to God. Cowper recalls the English heroes and martyrs, and urges immediate repentance. Finally, in the closing verse paragraph, he hangs his harp upon an aged beech and prays for a day when the people will have more willing ears to listen to the truth. Until then, he will sing no more.

Of all the satires, this is the most serious and the least satiric. A straight forward sermon in couplets, it has little beauty or humour to grace it and no character sketches to relieve the moral pounding. Its chief interest is the way it displays the Evangelical reading and use of history for moral instruction.

When Cowper had amassed four satires, he sought a publisher, probably at the suggestion of Newton who agreed to act as an agent for his land-locked friend in Olney. The printing went much more slowly than Cowper had hoped, and at the suggestion of Johnson, he continued writing, thereby swelling the volume by four more satires, especially "Conversation" and "Retirement". In writing to William Unwin, Cowper said, "Johnston is printing away, and I am writing away, as if it was a race between us. The Volume will be larger in consequence than was at first proposed by near a third of its

dimensions."[31] "Retirement", the last satire, was completed on October 2, 1781, and the completed volume was published on March 1, 1782.[32] It is possible, as Mrs. Russell has suggested, that John Thornton, the Evangelical philanthropist, underwrote the cost of publishing the moral satires as he had the Olney Hymns.[33]

"Conversation"

"Conversation", the longest of the satires, is in some ways the most pleasing. Divided into two major sections, the first half discusses the abuses common in conversation, and the second argues for religion as a proper subject for social discourse. The poem attempts to distinguish Christian conversation from that which is idle and pernicious. He attacks swearing and those whose speech panders to lust. In a lighter tone, he creates characters to express his dislike of those who constantly debate. No matter how you try, you can never agree with "Sir Soph". "Dubius" is so careful in qualifying all he says, he ends with no opinions.

Stories add interest to conversation, but one should observe the qualities of a good story. Pipe-smoking should be avoided since it drives off the ladies and creates a thirst leading to drunkenness and sensual conversation. Also objectionable is the man who talks only of himself and his affairs and the man who uses perfume. Worse than the Bore, who has nothing to say, are those who talk only of

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[31] Letters, I, p. 324.

[32] Ibid., pp. 361-362; 454.

[33] Russell, p. 40.

their illnesses. The bashfulness of men, especially British, is caused by their vanity, and the country squire who talks only of fox-hunting is called in for special denunciation.

The transition to the second half of the poem is a sermon condemning the social prohibition against talking about the Gospel. By a paraphrase of Luke xxiv. 13-35, he presents a scriptural pattern for Christian conversation, the story of the two disciples on the afternoon of the day of the Resurrection who while walking on the road to Emmaus from Jerusalem are joined by their risen Lord. All their conversation is about the Christ. Religious conversation, therefore, is of God and his Gospel. Such conversation is not death of wit, but purges and makes it shine the more. Among Christian friends religious conversation should spontaneously praise God.

Evil friendship, in contrast, is a pact between two evil men against God. Christian friendship is free and joyful and can share sorrow as well. He defends the beauty of the true Christian and dismisses the satirical attacks on the stage against the Evangelicals as distortions. After a brief digression on poetry, he concludes with his wish to make all things to praise God.

"Conversation", one of the better organised of the satires and the most Horatian, may be based in part on an early Connoisseur essay.[34] It is distinctively Evangelical only in its defense of religion as a proper subject for conversation and its criticism of

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[34]Arthur Sherbo, "Cowper's Connoisseur Essays," Modern Language Notes, LXX (1955), pp. 340-342; and Raymond F. Howes, "Cowper on Conversation", Quarterly Journal of Speech, XVIII (1932), pp. 30-45.

idle conversation.

"Retirement"

In "Retirement" Cowper treats an Augustan theme and interprets it from the viewpoint of an Evangelical poet. An order underlies Cowper's satires even though he digresses from it. Generally the pattern he follows is intended to attract the reader through accepted views and devices and, once lured in, to spring the trap of Evangelical truth upon him. Retirement is a conventional theme, and Cowper's development of it is conventional, but the personal viewpoint reminds the reader of the character of the poet who has chosen retirement as his way of life and is here defending it. A detailed summary may be helpful to show how thoroughly the Augustan and Evangelical have been blended.

Men tied to the oars of commerce in cities, long to retire, to escape to "rural shade" to improve their last days. Conscience thus calls man (a creature formed for God alone) away from selfish ends and aims, from what "debilitates and enflames", to rural areas where "traces of Eden" are found which may remind him of his "Maker's power and love". But men who have soiled their souls for sixty years rarely redeem them in their closing ten. Bad habits tend to kill or choke out the good seed in men.

A young man may retire to serve God, whom "we were born t'obey", and may "trace, in nature's most minute design, /The signature and stamp of pow'r divine". Cowper digresses to do just that: Rirst he sees the microcosm, the minute and tiny. He wonders at the proportion and sees God's goodness in not making insects larger. Next he

views the waters of the earth, rivers and seas. Finally he lifts his eyes and thoughts to survey the macrocosm, the sun, moon and stars, and ends with praise to the Creator. Though humbled by the majesty of God as seen in creation, he seeks a clearer and more personal understanding through His Word, which reveals Him more clearly than His works. Nature with the Bible as guide may be used as a ladder, ascending which one comes to God.

Rural retirement, however, is not the only place where God may be found. God may be feared in the city as well as in the country. In the country, however, it is easier to concentrate on thoughts of God and to repress passion or a favourite sin, to practise self-examination, to compare and measure one's thoughts and conduct by scriptural standards, and to study the Bible and to seek therein the will of God. In the country may be found leisure, silence, freedom from the preoccupation with business, and escape from conflicting arguments. Such things are at least conducive to the "great pursuit".

Shifting to the more Evangelical, Cowper uses an extended metaphor to show the vanity of man's values. On opening the "plan" or "map" of God, we see a small island - the life of man - surrounded by eternity which circles and limits man's years. On the island men examine and explore every creek and cavern seeking that which they think is good - shells and weeds. Thus with many shells they think themselves rich, and those groaning beneath the largest accumulation, the happiest. While in their serious play, however, waves suddenly sweep many away. Those remaining weep briefly but soon return to their play and follow their fellows into the deep. A few

leave the mob on the shore and ask of heaven truth, wisdom, grace and heavenly peace. The few wise, scorned by the many foolish, wait patiently for their release from this imperfect state and are soon taken into scenes of "glorious day".

Cowper shifts abruptly to the various reasons why men retire to the country. The poet retires because he dislikes noise and finds in nature the chief inspiration for his writing. The lover too finds refuge in rural retirement to luxuriate in his passion, but this reason for retirement is condemned. Passions are to be subdued and, though women may be beloved, they must not be adored; only God is worthy of adoration. The lover is, therefore, urged to return to an active, purposeful life. Those who are ill, especially those mentally ill, may find health by retreating to nature. But only God can cure them, not nature, and he urges them to trust in God.[35] The disappointed statesman also seeks retirement in the country, but soon finds it irksome and flees at the first opportunity back to Court.

In addition to the various reasons why men retire, there are also false understandings of what rural retirement is. Some "retire" to a suburban roadside house just outside the city bounds where a few trees may be seen through the dust and where a coach stops just outside in case of rain. Others flee to watering places - Bath, Bristol and Tunbridge Wells - and seaside resorts for "retirement". Here, if they stop their silly chatter, they may see in the ocean the

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[35] This may reflect his early impression that he had committed the unpardonable sin by attributing an early temporary recovery from depression to a change of air and natural scenery. See the Memoir, pp. 50-51, and Maurice Quinlan's "William Cowper and the Unpardonable Sin", Journal of Religion, XXIII (1943), pp. 110-116.

attributes of God, especially his power and majesty. Others retire into rural obscurity to escape paying debts.

> Thus some retire to nourish hopeless woes;
> Some seeking happiness not found below;
> Some to comply with humour and a mind
> To social scenes by nature disinclin'd;
> Some sway'd by fashion, some by deep disgust;
> Some self-impoverish'd, and because they must;
> But few that court Retirement are aware
> Of half the toils they must encounter there.
> ("Retirement", 603-610)

With this transitional paragraph, Cowper shifts to a discussion of the problems of living in retirement. It is more difficult to manage leisure fruitfully than to work at some imposed task. Generally the centre of the problem is the cultivation of the mind. In the country there is time for thought, but thinking is difficult and should be directed to the highest things. Retirement unrelieved is undesirable. Some things are necessary to make retirement worthwhile: an active mind, good books, friends well-chosen and communion with God.

The concluding paragraphs urge retired activities which are neither censured nor excluded by religion: gardening, charity toward the poor, observation of nature as the handiwork of God, painting or sketching, and the writing of poetry for moral ends. So Cowper concludes "Retirement" with a list of those activities encouraged by Evangelicalism and fashionable in society, the activities with which he occupied his leisure.

Retirement and Evangelicalism

With reason, most critics consider "Retirement" as the finest of the satires. Norman Nicholson sees "Retirement" and "Conversation"

as being freer of Evangelical cant and attributes this change to Cowper's new acquaintance, Lady Austen.

> In 1780, at the age of 49, he wrote first of all a few occasional verses and then began the set of eight moral satires. The first six seem to have been written merely to occupy his mind, as convalescents take up knitting or jigsaws. Then in the summer of 1781, he met Lady Austen and the two fine satires written after this meeting, Conversation and Retirement, show a new glow of interest in the world, and a new pleasure in his growing powers of expression. He was now no longer a two-finger rhymer, a case for psychotherapy, but a true poet, soon to be the most celebrated of his time.[36]

Although this is true, it would be wrong to suggest that either poem is not Evangelical. Lady Austen, for all her gaiety, was an Evangelical herself, and to limit Evangelicalism to only its narrower, more unpleasant expressions, would be to falsify it. Both poems are as centrally Evangelical as anything Cowper wrote. The difference lies rather in the attractiveness of this aspect of Evangelicalism. From the beginning Christian conversation was praised as a proper activity for the Evangelical. John Wesley was careful to stress its value, although he also cautioned his people against too much religious conversation. "Conversation" argues for the inclusion of religious discourse in polite speech to an extent probably unacceptable to non-Evangelicals.

"Retirement" and "Conversation" are not different in content or attitude from the preceding six satires. We remember the delightful character sketches in the Horatian manner which make up the first 426 lines of "Conversation" but forget that more than half of the poem follows the sermonic style of the others. Cowper does write better than in the earlier pieces, but it offends less primarily because he

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[36]Norman Nicholson, William Cowper (1951), p. 44.

has moved to one of the more universally attractive sides of Evangelicalism - its stress on Christian friendship and nature. Then too, here Cowper is describing that part of living of which he knew and enjoyed so much - the life revealed in his letters, the Connoisseur essays, and in his more playful, shorter lyrics.

Speaking of "Retirement", Nicholson displays too limited an understanding of Evangelicalism: "As yet he still sees his life in the terms of religion, though a religion, now, which has place for gardening, painting, and poetry...."[37] Wesley had recommended particularly these activities for Christians. Furthermore, in letters written by Cowper following his "conversion", nature plays a rather prominent role in reflecting his new found joy. Newton enjoyed nature and commemorated his "spiritual" birthday annually by a long walk. The reading of both Newton and Cowper may have encouraged this interest as well. Newton all but memorised Shaftesbury's The Moralists and Cowper must also have known it well.

Retirement is a biblical practice enjoined on the Christian as a means of self examination. Such activity was Evangelical, though such injunctions to retire and the praise of retired life were by no means limited to Evangelicals. Even the stress placed upon such retirement for religious self-examination was not peculiarly Evangelical.

In essays of the period, retirement is frequently related to religious self-examination. In the Spectator, No. 465, Addison praises retirement for this reason.

The last method which I shall mention, for the giving

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[37]Nicholson, p. 60.

> life to a man's faith, is frequent retirement from the world, accompanied with religious meditation ... In our retirements, every thing disposes us to be serious. In courts and cities we are entertained with the works of men; in the country with those of God. One is the province of art, the other of nature. Faith and devotion naturally grow in the mind of every reasonable man, who sees the impressions of divine power and wisdom in every object on which he casts his eye.

Dr. Johnson, in Rambler essay No. 110, urges retirement from the "cares and pleasures of the world ... as useful to repentance".

> He, therefore, that feels himself alarmed by his conscience, anxious for the attainment of a better state, and afflicted by the memory of his past faults, may justly conclude that the great work of repentance is begun, and hope by retirement and prayer, the natural and religious means of strengthening his conviction, to impress upon his mind such a sense of the divine presence as may overpower the blandishments of secular delights and enable him to advance from one degree of holiness to another till death shall set him free from doubt and contest, misery and temptation.

Johnson's preference for the city is well-known. The retirement here referred to need not be a rural retirement, but an entering into one's closet for prayer. This, it must be insisted, is the heart of Cowper's conception of retirement as well.

> Truth is not local, God alike pervades
> And fills the world of traffic and the shades,
> And may be fear'd amidst the busiest scenes,
> Or scorned where business never intervenes.
> ("Retirement", 119-122)

The primary reason for retirement is to examine one's conduct in the light of the Bible. All Cowper argues for is retirement from a busy, anxious, competitive life as at "least friendly to the great pursuit".[38]

The theme of retirement and retreat was, of course, a common one in the eighteenth century. Cowper differs only in the stress he

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[38] "Retirement", 146.

places on certain aspects rather than any sharp divergence from conventional use. For purposes of discussion, it may be helpful to compare Cowper's "Retirement" with three rather well known poems on the same theme from early in the century, John Pomfret's "The Choice" (1700), Anne, Countess of Winchelsea's "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" (1713) and the anonymous "The Retirement" published in David Lewis's Miscellaneous Poems (1730).

Pomfret's poem depends most obviously on classical patterns. His retreat is near "some fair town" in a house containing only the "useful, Necessary, Plain" and a modest library composed of Horace, Virgil, Juvenal and Ovid. To share his solitude, he desires two friends of like mind and a "modest Fair" near by to enliven his days occasionally. He seeks a healthy moderation rather than asceticism. For Pomfret, retirement is valuable in and for itself. This is the good life, not a means of achieving it. Religion and Christian values are noticeably absent.

For Anne, Countess of Winchelsea, in contrast, retirement is the way whereby one may regain Eden and find the freedom or "Liberty" to pursue the pleasures of the mind. A stronger negative element is present. In retirement, the world is excluded. It must be far enough from the city, therefore, to discourage vain visits and visitors. Thus withdrawn, she need not hear the news of the world nor the petty gossip. Here also she is freed from the ambitious scramble for money and position.

Further, life in retirement should be a modern recapturing of life in Eden. All food should be natural and simply prepared. As in Eden, she desires only one partner to share her solitude, a man

suited to her mind. Like Adam and Eve they will occupy their time in love unspoiled by jealousy. In such a setting the mind is easily lifted to heavenly thoughts, and such contemplation of the mind is worth more than all the pleasures left behind. The new elements introduced stress retirement as a means to a higher goal, the life of the mind, and the classical ideal has been modified and related to the ideal life in the Garden as contrasted with negative forces present in the world.

"The Retirement" takes one further step away from the classical and becomes consciously Christian in its understanding and expression. For the writer, retirement clearly is for the purpose of drawing close to God.

> In Sighs and Pray'rs my Soul I bend,
> But rise to Transports in the End.

In such an "Eden", with God his only visitor and friend, he finds a foretaste of heaven. Though physically alone, he is less alone than when in the crowds of cities.

Thomson adds one further value to be gained from retirement. For the poet retreat is helpful primarily in bringing him into immediate contact with Nature, and Nature will awaken "poetical enthusiasm, the philosophical reflection, and the moral sentiment...."[39] Thomson, however, was more concerned with the praise of nature, especially as seen through the eyes of the New Science, than with the praise of God.

Cowper when compared with Pomfret is more overtly Christian but shares with him the Augustan taste for the middle state and his choice of authors. With Anne, Countess of Winchelsea, he identifies the

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[39]James Thomson, The Seasons, Preface to "Winter", p. clxviii. See also "Autumn", 1278-1351.

retired life with life before the Fall and the nearest approach to it which man may achieve. Finally, with the author of "The Retirement", he shares the view that in retreat one may more easily commune with God. The only distinctively Evangelical note in "Retirement" is Cowper's belief that the man who has had an Evangelical awakening is given insight into nature, especially through the Bible, which is not available to the reason of an unconverted man. Yet even here it is largely a matter of stress since orthodox Christianity has always considered nature as secondary to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as contained in Holy Scripture.

Cowper, however, distinguishes between retirement and rejection of society.[40] He does not desire a severing of all human ties, the espousal of the life of the hermit, or a hatred and aversion for humankind. Retirement for Cowper, as it was for the Augustans, included fellowship with a few, well-chosen friends.[41]

> I praise the Frenchman, his remark was shrewd -
> How sweet, how passing sweet, is solitude!
> But grant me still a friend in my retreat,
> Whom I may whisper - solitude is sweet.
> ("Retirement", 739-742)

Once he has stated the generally accepted view, following his usual method, he moves on to give it an Evangelical emphasis. Human companionship is desirable and a blessing, but more important is fellow-

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[40] Johnson defines "retirement" as (2) a "private way of life", and quotes Thomson:

> An elegant sufficiency, content,
> Retirement, rural quiet, friendship, books,
> Progressive virtue, and approving heaven.

[41] See also "Verses. Supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk during his solitary abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez":

> Society, friendship, and love,
> Divinely bestowed upon man, <u>etc</u>. (17-18)

ship divine.

> Yet neither these delights, nor aught beside
> That appetite can ask, or wealth provide,
> Can save us always from a tedious day,
> Or shine the dulness of still life away:
> Divine communion, carefully enjoy'd,
> Or sought with energy, must fill the void.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Not knowing thee, we reap, with bleeding hands,
> Flow'rs of rank odour upon thorny lands,
> And, while experience cautions us in vain,
> Grasp seeming happiness, and find it pain.
> ("Retirement", 743-748, 753-756)

As some have preferred "Retirement" because they have found it less Evangelical, others have seen in it an anticipation of his use of nature which reaches its fulfilment in The Task. Those critics who see Cowper as a pre-Romantic have found in the satires, particularly "Retirement", indications of his love and veneration for nature. However, nature for Cowper, as it was for Pope, is the setting, the backdrop for human activity. It is God's creation, and by the enlightened or rational mind his finger prints may be discovered. In saying in The Task, "God made the country, man made the town", Cowper was only indicating a self-evident fact. He was not saying nature was free from the effects of the Fall, but only that in the city he was surrounded by the agents of that fall and more open to temptation. The original Fall occurred in a garden, not in a city, and Cowper never forgets that fact. He goes to nature, not usually for itself, but as to a less distracting setting in which he may worship God.

Fully to enjoy nature, one must be right with God. That this idea was not limited to Evangelicals is clear from Knox's Essays, but Cowper particularly links an enjoyment of nature with an Evangelical conversion or "awakening".

> Nature, assuming a more lovely face,
> Borrowing a beauty from the works of grace,
> Shall be despis'd and overlook'd no more,
> Shall fill thee with delights unfelt before,
> Impart to things inanimate a voice,
> And bid her mountains and her hills rejoice;
> The sound shall run along the winding vales,
> And thou enjoy an Eden ere it fails.
> ("Retirement", 357-364)

Cowper always maintains an orthodox Christian distinction between the Creator and his creation. Nature is always the handmaid of grace, never a substitute for Scripture nor adequate without revelation.

The reading of Cowper as a pre-Romantic has prevented many from seeing the essentially Augustan character of his diction. The eye which watches for intimations of Wordsworth's poetry has been too frequently misled by Cowper's genuine love of nature to neglect the way Cowper carefully observes neo-classic principles in the selection of his language. His diction is always determined by the purpose and intention of his poem. His descriptions of nature, even in "Retirement", are Augustan rather than Romantic. Notice the "poetic diction" of the following passage in which he condemns retirement for the lover who turns to nature as a place in which he may luxuriate in his passion.

> Pastoral images and still retreats,
> Umbrageous walks and solitary seats,
> Sweet birds in concert with harmonious streams,
> Are all enchantments in a case like thine,
> Conspire against thy peace with one design,
> Sooth thee to make thee but a surer prey,
> And feed the fire that wastes thy pow'rs away.
> ("Retirement", 257-264)

Cowper describes nature in this way not because he fails to observe it closely but rather because his intention is not to describe the scenery but to illustrate the seductive dangers of retirement to the

lover. It is not the individual setting but the hazards to the lover which must be the centre of his concern. Or consider the following two couplets from the same verse paragraph:

> In sighs he worships his supremely fair,
> And weeps a sad libation in despair,
> Adores a creature, and, devout in vain,
> Wins in return an answer of disdain.
> (224-228)

In this example, Cowper properly adopts the style suitable for love poetry, according to Augustan standards. The care with which he has chosen his diction is seen in "worships", "supremely fair", "creature" and "devout". The lover has sinfully exalted his beloved to the degree that he "worships" her; she has in fact become his "supremely fair", a rank properly held only by God. "Creature" does not give the reader a sense of her beauty for the same reason "supremely fair" does not; it was not Cowper's intention. "Creature" does, however, describe her relationship to God in the nature of things and is the only word which accurately and briefly could describe her in this context. Again, "devout" indicates misplaced worship, the original sin of Adam which led him (especially according to Milton) to join Eve in eating the apple. The lover falls into sin who worships the creature rather than the Creator. Therefore, he is devout in vain both in relation to his beloved who scorns him and in relation to God who will judge him.

When Cowper does become detailed and looks directly at his object, that object is not so often nature as men in action or a domestic scene. In "Retirement", for example, notice the portrait of the mentally ill patient of Heberden, ll. 283-288:

> Look where he comes - in this embow'r'd alcove -

Stand close conceal'd, and see a statue move:
Lips busy, and eyes fixt, foot falling slow,
Arms hanging idly down, hands clasp'd below,
Interpret to the marking eye distress,
Such as its symptoms can alone express.

Here there is concrete imagery, close observation and description of each movement, his posture, and hands, excellent use of stress and alliteration in the third line and strongly archive language.

Further along in the same verse paragraph, an effective picture of nature does occur which employs vivid imagery. However, part of the language is derived from the Bible, not from an observation of nature alone. As for most Evangelicals, it was natural for Cowper to see nature in the words of Scripture.

To thee the day-spring, and the blaze of noon, [Luke i. 78]
The purple ev'ning and resplendent moon,
The stars that, sprinkled o'er the vault of night, [Job xxv. 5]
Seem drops descending in a show'r of light,
Shine not, or undesir'd and hated shine,
Seen through the medium of a cloud like thine.
("Retirement", 347-352)

Cowper is continually at pains to justify his own retired life. He had lived his whole life with shockingly little concern for others. Like the Puritans, the Evangelicals saw life as a gift for which man was responsible as a steward to God. Two frequent themes of John Wesley's were the stewardship of time and the stewardship of money.[42] Cowper lived his whole life dependent upon his relatives and Mary Unwin. In the background of his letters one can occasionally hear family grumbling over his failure to support himself. In "Retirement" Cowper defends his life as having value. Huang is correct in his comparison of Cowper and Goldsmith. "The difference between Gold-

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[42] See especially the following sermon: No. 23, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount", Discourse VIII; No. 44, "The Use of Money", and No. 51, "The Good Steward".

smith and Cowper is this: while Goldsmith expressed a sentimental and nostaligic yearning for 'retirement', Cowper describes the actual state of enjoyment in retirement, feeling as it were called upon to defend his seeming idleness".[43]

There are many lines in "Retirement" and "Table Talk" which at least implicitly defend Cowper's life. This defence is made explicit in the concluding verse paragraph of "Retirement":

> Me poetry (or, rather, notes that aim
> Feebly and vainly at poetic fame)
> Employs, shut out from more important views,
> Fast by the banks of the slow winding Ouse;
> Content if, thus sequester'd, I may raise
> A monitor's, though not a poet's praise,
> And while I teach an art too little known,
> To close life wisely, may not waste my own.
> (801-808)

From the time of his move to Olney, he was surrounded by friends, especially Newton, who were energetic in serving others. Cowper entered into such activity only briefly and not at all after 1773. He did occasionally give legal advice, but it appears never to have been more than casual. Until he began to write, therefore, he was a gentleman with no fixed obligations or responsibilities. By writing moral satires he found an escape from idleness,

> Absence of occupation is not rest,
> A mind quite vacant is a mind distress'd.
> ("Retirement", 623-624)

Poetry was a purposeful activity which allowed him to assert his personality and a means to demonstrate his value to a wider community.

Cowper may be described as an Evangelical late Augustan. That the satires are Evangelical will be denied by no one although his Evangelicalism may be misunderstood and overstressed. Cowper accepts

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[43]Roderick Huang, William Cowper: Nature Poet (1957), p. 102.

the tradition of Augustan verse as practised by Alexander Pope, but he infuses into it the Puritan, biblical temper of John Milton. His Augustanism is his own, not simply an imitation of Pope, and his Evangelicalism made him more biblical than Miltonic. Like Milton, he loved the classics, but, if one can judge from his selection of classical head pieces for his satires, it was the expression by Horace and Virgil of thoughts in words similar to the Bible which attracted him, and it was their morality and graceful virtue which he praised.

Biblical Poetry

Cowper's concern with the craft of poetry is particularly interesting for the way neo-classic standards are supported and complemented by his devotion to Holy Scripture. At times he defends his modification of Augustan principles by appealing to the practices of the Bible. There are two statements, both in "Table Talk", which display this tension.

> modern taste
> Is so refin'd, and delicate, and chaste,
> That verse, whatever fire the fancy warms,
> Without a creamy smoothness has no charms.
> Thus, all success depending on an ear,
> And thinking I might purchase it too dear,
> If sentiment were sacrific'd to sound,
> And truth cut short to make a period round
> I judg'd a man of sense could scarce do worse
> Than caper in the morris-dance of verse.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Give me the line that plows its stately course
> Like a proud swan, conqu'ring the stream by force;
> That, like some cottage beauty, strikes the heart,
> Quite unindebted to the tricks of art.
> When labour and when dullness, clubs in hand,
> Like the two figures at St. Dunstan's, stand,
> Beating alternately, in measur'd time,
> The clockwork tintinabulum of rhime,

Exact and regular the sound will be;
But such mere quarter strokes are not for me.
(II. 510-519; 522-531)

Cowper's chief concern in these passages is with strength and artlessness. In tempering his praise of Pope, he complains of his "musical finesse", his "nice ear", and his "delicate touch". But he also criticises Churchill for being "too proud for art, and trusting in mere force", and he condemns the minor poets of his time for writing "artless airs" without skill.

Cowper uses "artless" in two distinct ways: When art is an end in itself, it is wrong. The too "creamy smooth ess" of modern taste places the whole stress on sound to the detriment of "sentiment" and "truth". No matter how skilful the metrics, poetry can only be great if it is written on a great theme. The greatest poetry will consider the ways of God, and with such a theme, the poet may expect the aid of the divine. For that purpose he invokes God through the Holy Spirit to aid him, a practice for which he had the precedent of Milton, who had "Christianised" the classical pattern, as well as the Hebrew prophets through whom the Spirit of God "dictated" poetry. In "Hope", when he describes the life of man transformed by grace, Cowper calls upon God to help him write compelling, moving verse:

Oh, see me sworn to serve thee, and command
A painter's skill into a poet's hand!
That, while I, trembling, trace a work divine,
Fancy may stand aloof from the design,
And light, and shade, and ev'ry stroke be thine.[44]

Poetry so inspired does not need "fancy" to seek out "shining orna-

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[44]Cf. "Table Talk", II. 754ff.

ments" to embellish the message. "Fancy" is used here in Dryden's sense of the image producing faculty which ranges widely in search of illustrative imagery to decorate the theme. To the Augustans, the Fancy was suspect as being too closely allied with the irrational. Cowper's use in the lines above suggests both meanings. A poem presenting a divine theme is sufficient in itself if it depends only on a faithful imitation of the divine.

Truth, when faithfully presented, has a beauty and a power which resides in itself outside the skill of the orator or the poet. The best and greatest poetry would be that which relied most closely upon this beauty inherent in truth. Art, therefore, can only lessen or detract from the truth. For his authority, Cowper turns to the speech of Jesus.

> Through all he spoke a noble plainness ran -
> Rhet'ric is artifice, the work of man;
> And tricks and turns, that fancy may devise,
> Are far too mean for him that rules the skies.
> ("Expostulation", 135-138)

The faithful preacher, therefore, has an advantage over the poet. He may speak unfettered by the conventions of poetry and the artistic expectations of his auditors.

> But happier far, who comfort those that wait
> To hear plain truth at Judah's hallow'd gate.
> Their language simple, as their manners meek,
> No shining ornaments have they to seek;
> Nor labour they, nor time, nor talents, waste,
> In sorting flow'rs to suit a fickle taste;
> But, while they speak the wisdom of the skies,
> Which art can only darken and disguise,
> Th' abundant harvest, recompense divine,
> Repays their work, - the gleaning only mine.
> ("Hope", 762-771)

In so far as art darkens and disguises truth, just so far is it bad. There is, however, an honest art whose function is to present truth

as winningly as possible, for the purpose of capturing the reader and leading him to listen, to learn and to mend his ways.

> Happy the bard (if that fair name belong
> To him that blends no fable with his song)
> Whose lines, uniting, by an honest art,
> The faithful monitor's and poet's part,
> Seek to delight, that they may mend mankind,
> And, while they captivate, inform the mind:
> Still happier, if he till a thankful soil,
> And fruit reward his honourable toil.
> ("Hope", 754-761)

Cowper's objection to "fables" was shared by others, but the expression of his objection is distinctly Evangelical and biblical. As Ian Jack has noted, one influence of the New Science was to call into question the use of "the delightful deceit of fables".[45] In "Conversation", II. 814-854, however, Cowper is concerned that the use of fables and the religion of the Ancients as a source for imagery had led some to a serious toying with paganism. So to play, even in jest or for ornamenting one's poetry, approached too closely to blasphemy to go unreproved. Cowper excludes classical mythology as a source for imagery and substitutes instead the biblical myths which for him were more powerful because true.

> 'Tis time, however, if the case stand thus,
> For us plain folks, and all who side with us,
> To build our altar, confident and bold,
> And say as stern Elijah said of old -
> The strife now stands upon a fair award, /I Kings xviii 21/
> If Israel's Lord be God, then serve the Lord;
> If he be silent, faith is all a whim,
> Then Baal is the God, and worship him.
> ("Conversation", 847-854)

The Evangelical poet is not asked to give up, except in a limited sense, what had been his before conversion. Rather the entire man is

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[45] Jack, Augustan Satire, p. 154. Quoted from Sprat's History of the Royal-Society of London, p. 340.

made new. All that was of value to him before is enriched by the new direction in which his skill and talents are now directed. He is no longer attracted by all that is "absurd, prophane, impure", and he now pursues the way that "truth and nature teach".

> No longer labours merely to produce
> The pomp of sound, or tinkle without use:
> Where'er it winds, the salutary stream,
> Sprightly and fresh, enriches ev'ry theme,
> While all the happy man possess'd before
> The gift of nature, or the classic store,
> Is made subservient to the grand design,
> For which heav'n form'd the faculty divine.
> ("Conversation", 891-898)

Such a poet has a special advantage in that he has a clearer vision of truth than his fellow poets and is provided with a language suitable to the theme. Thus the neo-classic concept of propriety may be used to defend Cowper's use of scriptural language.

> And, while it shows the land the soul desires,
> The language of the land she seeks, inspires.
> ("Conversation", 885-886)

Therefore, when Cowper uses the term "artless", he means poetry which derives its beauty from its content rather than from its form, or poetry which is derived from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit rather than shaped by the hands of fallen and sinful man.

There is, further, an artlessness which is taught by nature, an art measured more by its effect upon the reader than by its craft. Thus, it, "like a cottage beauty, strikes the heart" rather than the reason. Propositions, no matter how rational, speak only to men's reason, which as Pope notes, "in most men is but weak".[46] To move men to repentance for their sins and to grasp the new life in Christ Jesus requires more than an appeal to reason alone. The whole man

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[46]Pope, Letters, III, 419.

must be moved. Art, therefore, should produce awe of God's majesty, dread of his justice, and desire for his love and reconciliation. The Bible is the only book with these "sublime" powers, and Cowper chose the plainness and simplicity of scriptural language for this reason. But he also uses "artless" to describe his "artfulness".

There is a dissembling art which appears artless. In this Cowper is consciously making a concession to the taste of his readers, and it is on this basis that he defends his irregularities and basic formlessness in the longer poems. He prefers the plain and unadorned style of the scriptures, as being more natural, but for the sake of his readers, he will add imagery which is "poetic".

> Thus have I sought to grace a serious lay
> With many a wild, indeed, but flow'ry spray,
> In hopes to gain, what else I must have lost,
> Th' attention pleasure has so much engross'd.
> ("Charity", 628-631)

He also justifies his use of extended digressions by the taste of the times. His quotation from Virgil on the title page reflects well the irregular form of the satires.

> So water trembling in a polish'd vase,
> Reflects the beam that plays upon its face,
> The sportive light, uncertain where it falls,
> Now strikes the roof, now flashes on the walls.[47]
> (Virgil, Aeneid, VIII; Dryden)

And for his defence, he appeals again to the high purpose of his verse as justification for conforming to what may be the poor taste of his

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[47]Compare Cowper's own statement in "Conversation", ll. 789-794:

> A poet does not work by square or line,
> As smiths and joiners perfect a design;
> At least we moderns, our attentions less,
> Beyond th' example of our sires, digress,
> And claim a right to scamper and run wide,
> Wherever chance, caprice, or fancy guide.

audience.

> Digression is so much in modern use,
> Thought is so rare, and fancy so profuse,
> Some never seem so wide of their intent,
> As when returning to the theme they meant;
> As mendicants, whose business is to roam,
> Make ev'ry parish, but their own, their home.
> Though such continual zigzags in a book,
> Such drunken reelings, have an awkward look,
> And I had rather creep to what is true,
> Than rove and stagger with no mark in view;
> Yet to consult a little, seem'd no crime,
> The freakish humour of the present time:
> But now to gather up what seems dispers'd,
> And touch the subject I design'd at first,
> May prove, though much beside the rules of art,
> Best for the public, and my wisest part.
> ("Conversation", 855-870)

Horatian satire, Pope's Imitations of Horace for example, employed a loose, somewhat digressive structure appropriate to a greater informality and a more personal style. There was a general unity to the whole poem not necessarily discernible in the parts. Dr. Johnson in discussing Young's Night Thoughts cautioned against a close reading of parts. "The excellence of this work is not exactness, but copiousness; particular lines are not to be regarded; the power is in the whole, and the whole there is a magnificence like that ascribed to Chinese Plantation, the magnificence of vast extent and endless diversity".[48] At this point in his writing Cowper states a preference for a more careful ordering, but both in the satires and in The Task digression is a fundamental part of his method.

Cowper clearly does not mean by 'artless" careless or undisciplined writing. He criticises his contempories for writing poems "lank and Long", for using Scottish diction and scenery which they have never seen and for their prologues in which the wit lies more in

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[48] Johnson, Lives, III, 396.

what is left unsaid than in statement. Others, however, think "manner is all" and that "genius, sense, or wit" is secondary.

In discussing the true poet, Cowper lists those qualities which he most prizes:

> Fancy, freedom, fluency of thought,
> Harmony, strength, words exquisitely sought;
> Fancy, that from the bow that spans the sky
> Brings colours, dipt in heav'n, that never die.
> ("Table Talk", 700-703)

This passage contains one of the few favourable references by Cowper to "fancy". Customarily for him, fancy is an irrational element which leads to poetic abuses. Here, however, the fancy seeks imagery to describe the nature of God, that which is beyond the limits of man's finite reason, and is controlled by its object. Fancy need not be irrational; used to glorify God, it may be supra-rational.

With the best of the late-eighteenth century poets, Cowper tried to write "strong lines". The couplet attracted eighteenth century poets because of the great value they placed on "strength" or "strong lines". In so doing, they inevitably prized perspicuity, or fidelity to the content of the line. Dr. Johnson, as usual, has the best definition of "strong" as a poetic quality: "Forcibly written; comprising much meaning in few words",[49] and in his "Life of Denham", he amplifies this definition. "The 'strength of Denham', which Pope so emphatically mentions, is to be found in many lines and couplets, which convey much meaning in few words, and exhibit the sentiment with

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[49]Johnson, Dictionary, "Strong".

more weight than bulk".[50] Cowper in praising "strength" has the whole Augustan tradition behind him.

In addition to traditional support, however, was the Bible. Bishop Lowth, in discussing the "sententious style" in his Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1751), pointed to the Bible as an example of "strength".

> For as Cicero remarks, "in certain forms of expression there exists such a degree of conciseness, that a sort of metrical arrangement follows of course. For when words or sentences directly correspond, or when contraries are opposed exactly to each other, or even when words of a similar sound run parallel, the composition will in general have a metrical cadence". It [the sententious style] possesses, however, great force in other respects, and produces several great and remarkable beauties of composition. For, as the sacred poems derive from this source a great part of their elegance, harmony, and splendour, so they are not unfrequently indebted to it for their sublimity and strength. Frequent and laconic sentences render the composition remarkably concise, harmonious, and animated; the brevity itself imparts to it additional strength, and being contracted within a narrow space, it has a more energetic and pointed effect.[51]

Of particular interest is the close association noted by Lowth between metre and strength. As seen above, the two were closely related. The regularity of the metre hammers into the reader's consciousness the statements made. Cowper only occasionally shows a mastery of sound and metre. When it does occur, an organic union of sound and sense carries the meaning with force.

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[50] Johnson, "Life of Denham", Lives, I, p. 79. See also: Donald A. Davie, Purity of Diction in English Verse (1952); "The Critical Principles of William Cowper", The Cambridge Journal, VII (1953), pp. 182-188; "Syntax as Action in Eighteenth-Century Poetic Theory", Articulate Energy (1955), pp. 56-64; The Late Augustans Introduction (1958); and also George Williamson, "Strong Lines", Seventeenth Century Contexts (1960), pp. 120-131.

[51] Lowth, Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1847), pp. 101-102.

But man is frail, // and can but ill sustain
A long immunity // from grief and pain;
And, // after all the joys that plenty leads,
With tip-toe step // vice silently succeeds.
("Expostulation", 81-84)

The final line is particularly successful. Opening with regular iambic, the heavy stress falls immediately after the caesura and gains special force by being so placed. The "t"s in the first half of the line give the sound and impression of tip-toe stealth. The "s" sounds of the second half lend the statement a sinister quality appropriate to the sense. The variations in the placement of the caesura throughout the passage is effective.

Cowper's couplets generally, however, lack strength. Sometimes his lines are weak because of an over use of prepositions and articles or exclamations which consume syllables without carrying much meaning. For example, he begins an anti-slavery tirade in "Charity" with the following lines, the first of which is particularly lax and empty.

Oh, most degrading of all ills, that wait
On man, a mourner in his best estate!
All other sorrows virtue may endure,
And find submission more than half a cure.
(155-158)

Nothing in these lines stimulates the imagination or moves the emotions to a hatred of slavery; not one image sensuously shocks us with the degrading nature of the evil. We must take his word for it rather than experience it for ourselves.

At other times, usually through forceful verbs, Cowper does write strong lines "comprising much meaning in few lines". The following description from "Hope" of the childhood of man without

grace shows Cowper's sharp eye for details and his concern for a more closely packed line.

> From infancy, through childhood's giddy maze,
> Froward at school, and fretful in his plays,
> The puny tyrant burns to subjugate
> The free republic of the whip-gig state.
> If one, his equal in athletic frame,
> Or, more provoking still, of nobler name,
> Dare step across his arbitrary views,
> An Iliad, only not in verse, ensues:
> The little Greeks look trembling at the scales,
> Till the best tongue, or heaviest hand, prevails.
> (187-196)

In these lines, many elements combine to make for success. The subject is a grim one indeed - man as a sinner and rebel against God - but the tone is light, whimsical and reminiscent of childhood with some nostalgia for happy days now gone. His use of alliteration, a frequent pitfall for Cowper, effectively emphasises and contributes to his meaning in "froward ... fretful" and "heaviest hand". His choice of imagery is also good. Childhood as a free republic, a "whip-gig state", over which the young tyrant wishes to rule is accurate and presents in miniature the man who will follow from the boy. The allusion to the Iliad, developed in "little Greeks" and the tiny epic battle, reduce the seriousness of the clash to proportion and produce the gentle smile he intends. The verbs are well chosen and placed where their effect will be most forceful, especially "burns" and "prevails".

As well as biblical language, Cowper uses the simile as a means of raising his style in keeping with the high theme upon which he writes. Again the reason for this may be traced to both Augustan and biblical sources. A good example of Cowper's use of an extended epic simile occurs in "Truth", 238-267. Nature is the setting, and

some care is given to suggest the spiritual state it represents. Cowper has a good eye for storms. The simile is extensively developed first, and then the application is made with some use of parallels, a practice biblical in character. Christ after he had presented a parable often interpreted it for the disciples. Cowper's similes are frequently parabolic in character.

Cowper sometimes develops a simile to great length, especially when he introduces a short allegory, to illustrate a religious principle. For example, to convey a vivid picture of Evangelical conversion, he takes the old, tried and trite metaphor of the prisoner pardoned for his crimes just before his execution, ("Hope", 712-741). The parallel is not perfect. The prospective convert is not on the edge of execution, but it stresses his passive relationship toward grace which is central in Cowper's Evangelicalism; man can do nothing but wait in prison; only God can pardon. Such a simile also gives him a dramatic and forceful way of presenting his idea.

Frequently with similes Cowper manages to convey ideas brightly and with force. In discussing freedom and the conflict with royal prerogatives, he states:

> Thus proud perogative, not much rever'd,
> Is seldom felt, though sometimes seen and heard;
> And in his cage, like parrot fine and gay,
> Is kept, to strut, look big, and talk away.
> ("Table Talk", 230-233)

The alliteration of "proud perogative" gains additional support from comparison with the parrot who pompously struts and looks "big".

Also some of Cowper's most effective imagery occurs in his similes.

> When one, that holds communion with the skies,

Has fill'd his urn where these pure waters rise,
And once more mingles with us meaner things,
'Tis even as if an angel shook his wings;
Immortal fragrance fills the circuit wide,
That tells us whence his treasures are supplied.
So, when a ship, well freighted with the stores
The sun matures on India's spicy shores,
Has dropt her anchor and her canvass furl'd
In some safe haven of our western world,
'Twere vain inquiring to what port she went;
The gale informs us, laden with the scent.
("Charity", 435-446)

In these similes Cowper's early devotion to Homer is clear. The simile is a poetic elaboration of a theme which adds beauty in keeping with the loveliness which Cowper finds in divine communion.

Cowper was derivative in his use of Augustan conventions. In his use of the Bible, however, he was more original although still well within the tradition of divine poetry which had a following in the earlier years of the century.

As in the hymns, the Bible was the primary source for his Evangelical point of view and for the diction used in his satires. There are two general ways in which he uses the Bible. Frequently he refers to the Scriptures in a direct and quickly recognisable way usually to illustrate a point or only as a passing reference. Sometimes he uses proof-texts to support a debatable point of doctrine or an unpopular view not widely held in the Church of England. Secondly, as in the hymns, he occasionally paraphrases a passage without indicating the source.

Inveterate habits choke th' unfruitful heart,
Their fibres penetrate its tend'rest part,
And, draining its nutritious pow'rs to feed
Their noxious growth, starve ev'ry better seed.
("Retirement", 41-44)

This passage, from the parable of the sower (Matthew xiii, 3-8,

18-23, especially verses 7 and 22), is one of the more familiar parables in the New Testament.[52] At other times, Cowper quotes bits and patches from all over the Bible. Usually the image chosen is a startling one, but at other times there appears to be little reason for his choice of biblical allusion.

In the following Cowper has mixed biblical with modern vices and thereby gains Scriptural support for his attack on female vanity.

> Curl'd, scented, furbelow'd and flounc'd around,
> With feet too delicate to touch the ground.
> They stretch'd the neck, and roll'd the wanton eye,
> And sigh'd for ev'ry fool that flutter'd by.
> ("Expostulation", 51-54)

The words of the prophet Isaiah must be recalled if the power of this allusion is to be fully realized.

> Moreover the Lord saith, Because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet: Therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion, and the Lord will discover their secret parts. In that day the Lord will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet ....The changeable suits of apparel, and the mantles, and the wimples ....And it shall come to pass, that instead of sweet smell there shall be stink; and instead of a girdle a rent; and instead of well set hair baldness; and instead of a stomacher a girding sackcloth; and burning instead of beauty.[53]

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52 Matthew xiii, 7 - And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: (v. 22) - He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful. See also: Mark iv, 3-8, 14-20 and Luke viii, 5-8, 11-15.

53 Isaiah, iii: 16-24.

Large sections of "Expostulation" are free paraphrases of Isaiah and the New Testament gospels. But as can be seen by comparing the lines of poetry with their source, Cowper lacks the violence and fury of the prophet and, when using such a source, depends upon the memory of the reader to recall the grosser elements. The object of his satire is one suitable for laughter--certainly The Rape of the Lock is a successful satire on female vanity--but Cowper does not arouse laughter. At least in this biblical allusion, his satire is more Juvenalian and is more closely allied to that of Swift than of Pope.

Cowper often uses a biblical allusion to support his more unpopular views. His "favour'd few"--which recurs only to make his exclusiveness the more irritating--has firm biblical grounds.[54] At other times the allusion is used perfunctorily because it happened to mind or as a passing illustration. Thus Cowper inserts "So Gideon earn'd a vict'ry not his own" into "Table Talk" to demonstrate that God can use any man who is humble enough to depend on Him to save a tottering state.[55] In this case he does not develop the reference but leaves it for the reader to recall the story and make the application. At other times he expounds on a text, and in so doing brings out the old parable or story in modern clothing with a modern application. Thus in his attack on hypocrisy, Cowper uses the incident from Luke xviii, 19 of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the Temple as a text for a

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[54]Matthew vii: 14; xxii: 14; Revelation iii: 4.

[55]"Table Talk", 360.

sermon ("Truth", 44-57).

On two occasions Cowper uses biblical allusion for ironic purposes. The first is to some extent ironic in the biblical context. Jesus, when condemned by the Pharisees for associating with sinners, answered them with "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke v, 32). In "Truth", Cowper attacks the modern Pharisees who in their pride depend upon their own righteousness for their salvation.

> Perish the virtue, as it ought, abhor'd,
> And the fool with it, who insults his Lord.
> Th' atonement a Redeemer's love has wrought
> Is not for you--the righteous need it not.
> ("Truth", 503-506)

Of greater effect, however, is another instance of irony achieved through an allusion to a well-known saying of Jesus.

> They could have held the conduct they pursue,
> Had Paul of Tarsus liv'd and died a Jew;
> And truth, propos'd to reas'ners wise as they,
> Is a pearl cast--completely cast away.
> ("Hope", 256-259)

The effect is achieved by not completing the statment assuming that the reader will recall Matthew vii, 6: "Give not that which is holy unto dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you." Such irony is indeed limited. It is gentle and creates at best a slight smile. Cowper strives for such effects; he rarely succeeds.

Cowper's expectations concerning the intimate knowledge of the Authorized Version by his readers is indeed great, certainly by modern standards. We are expected to recall, for example, that

Hophni and Phineas, the sons of Eli, were unfaithful priests (I Samuel ii, 34-35, "Expostulation", 449); that Lama sabachthani means "Why hast thou foresaken me?" (Matthew xxvii, 46, "Hope", 630). Generally, however, whether an allusion is recognized or not does not effect the meaning though it weakens the effectiveness. In "Expostulation", he speaks of the Incarnation and its effect upon the disobedient Jews.

> When he that rul'd them with a shepherd's rod,
> In form a man, in dignity a God,
> Came, not expected in that humble guise,
> To sift and search them with unerring eyes,
> He found, conceal'd beneath a fair outside,
> The filth of rottenness and worm of pride.
> ("Expostulation", 85-90)

The final couplet takes on more concreteness and greater depth of meaning when Matthew xxiii, 27 is recalled where scribes and Pharisees are compared with "whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness". Cowper has taken the biblical source and interpreted it for his own use--an attack upon spiritual pride, the worm which breeds filth no matter how fair the outside appears.

At times Cowper quotes directly from the Bible, once with quotes--"Beauty for ashes" (Isaiah lxi, 3; "Charity", 230)--expecting the reader to recognize immediately the source; and, "With every good and perfect gift" is from James i. 17, both passages familiar to readers of the Bible. Such quotes when brought up to date by a new context may gain in effectiveness. Usually, however, they are largely a part of the biblical language which he heard and read constantly.

Cowper was particularly attracted by the parables of Jesus, and he frequently refers to them, draws modern applications, and sometimes develops modern parables. After listing the joys of a virtuous life--charity, honesty, industry, benevolence--he ties these to the joys in "Father's house" from the parable of the prodigal son (Luke xv. 11-32) and makes the allusion precise by borrowing imagery from the parable itself.

> Delights like these, ye sensual and prophane,
> Ye are bid, begg'd, besought to entertain;
> Call'd to these crystal streams, do ye turn off,
> Obscene, to swill and swallow at a trough?
> ("Progress of Error", 263-266)

The allusion is general but no less effective for its power to recall the hunger of the prodigal and his life with the swine.

Cowper paraphrases both to gain Scriptural authority for what he teaches and also to use the literary power of biblical language. In "Hope", he loosely paraphrases two verses from Isaiah primarily for their poetic richness.[56]

> Well spake the prophet, Let the desert sing,
> Where sprang the thorn the spiry fir shall spring,
> And where unsightly and rank thistles grew
> Shall grow the myrtle and luxuriant yew.
> ("Hope", 524-527)

When he does paraphrase a passage, he makes it clear to the reader that the prophet is speaking, and therefore what is said is given

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[56]The Wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God (Isaiah xxxv. 1-2). I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together (Isaiah xli. 19).

on more than human authority.

> What says the prophet? Let that day be blest
> With holiness and consecrated rest.
> Pastime and business both it should exclude,
> And bar the door the moment they intrude;
> Nobly distinguish'd above all the six,
> By deeds in which the world must never mix,
> Hear him again. He calls it a delight,
> A day of luxury, observ'd aright,
> When the glad soul is made heav'n's welcome guest,
> Sits banqueting, and God provides the feast.[57]
> ("Progress of Error", 157-166)

In this passage Cowper has blended his sources freely. At no time does he appear to write directly from the Bible itself; he depends rather on his memory, on a mind well stocked with biblical imagery.

Occasionally a paraphrase is used as little more than filler.

> Grief is itself a med'cine, and bestow'd
> T'improve the fortitude that bears the load,
> To teach the wand'rer, as his woes increase,
> The path of wisdom, all whose paths are peace.
> ("Charity", 159-162)

This quotation from Proverbs iii. 17, seems hustled in to pad out the line. It lacks strength, creates no image which strikes the heart, and falls into biblical jargon.

At other times the recollection of the line of Scripture recalls the complete passage and accompanying associations.

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[57]Isaiah lviii. 13-14. If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed there with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

Hebrews ii. 1-3 was a common text for Evangelical preaching.[58] Cowper undoubtedly heard sermons on it from Newton and from others.

> If vice receiv'd her retribution due
> When we were visited, what hope for you?
> ("Expostulation", 247-248)

After telling of God's judgment on his people, Israel, Cowper calls the English to national repentance. The clutch of fear about the heart this biblical passage stimulates for one reared as an Evangelical is difficult to put into words. God's chosen people were cut off because of their disobedience. The Jews saw Jehovah through the dark glass of the Old Testament; Christians have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. If Christians disobey, how certain their punishment is! Nothing could be more dreadful.

As in the hymns written for the Olney Hymns, Cowper's use of the Bible is most successful when the poetic richness of the Scriptures has become truly his own. In praising the Moravian missionaries who carried the Gospel to Greenland, he contrasts the barren coldness of the land with the luxuriant climate and vegetation of the Middle East.

> Fir'd with a zeal peculiar, they defy
> The rage and rigour of a polar sky,
> And plant successfully sweet Sharon's rose [Song of Songs, ii.1]
> On icy plains, and in eternal snows.
> \+ + + +
> No groves have ye; no cheerful sound of birds,
> Or voice of turtle, in your land is heard [Song of Songs, ii.12]
> Nor grateful eglantine regales the smell
> Of those that walk at ev'ning where ye dwell.
> ("Hope", 461-464, 469-472)

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[58] Hebrews ii. 1-3. Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward: How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation ....

In these lines, Cowper nearly quotes his texts; in the following from "Retirement", repeating a metaphor used in "God moves in a mysterious way", the biblical epithet is organically related to the context. Cowper, frequently at his best when describing the ocean whipped by a storm strengthens and makes the following lines more dramatic by his use of scriptural language.

> Ocean exhibits, fathomless and broad,
> Much of the power and majesty of God.[59]
> He swathes about the swelling of the deep,
> That shines and rests, as infants smile and sleep;
> Vast as it is, it answers as it flows
> That breathings of the lightest air that blows;
> Curling and whit'ning over all the waste,
> The rising waves obey th'increasing blast,
> Abrupt and horrid as the tempest roars,
> Thunder and flash upon the stedfast shores,
> Till he that rides the whirlwind checks the rein,
> Then, all the world of waters sleep again. [60]
> ("Retirement", 525-536)

What does Cowper gain from his use of paraphrase of an allusion to Holy Scripture? For him personally it undoubtedly confirmed and supported what he wished to say. The Bible was the Word of God and carried with it the power to convict of sin and to lead the sinner to repentance and to God. No other source could make such a claim. Cowper was so steeped in the Bible that its incidents and language naturally flowed from him when he wrote,

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[59] Cf. Letters I, p. 358

[60] Cf. Thomson's "Seasons", "Winter", pp. 195-201:

> Huge uproar lords it wide. The clouds, commixed
> With stars swift-gliding, sweep along the sky.
> All Nature reels: till Nature's King, who oft
> Amid tempestuous darkness dwell alone,
> And on the wings of the careering wind
> Walks dreadfully serene, commands a calm;
> Then straight air, sea, and earth, are hushed at once.

especially when he was considering religious themes. And, finally, the Bible was currently recognized as a great collection of literature. It was acclaimed by critics for its sublimity, its simplicity, and its majesty. Cowper does not consciously set out to "imitate" the Bible; that was unnecessary. Without effort he drew from his biblical knowledge the imagery and illustrations which are so profuse in his sermons in verse.

It must be concluded, however, that the use of biblical language in the moral satires more frequently weakens than strengthens his poetry. The language of Scripture is too familiar to him; he no longer sees what he is writing. Instead the imagery and incidents have become mechanical and abstract. Rarely does he rise to the earlier achievements in scriptural language which is observable in the Olney Hymns at their best.

Cowper's Use of the Couplet

It is especially in his use of the couplet that Cowper draws upon the Augustan tradition. The choice was an inevitable one. As Sutherland rightly argues, "For rhetorical purpose--for generating excitement, compelling assent concentrating meaning--there is (or, until it went out of fashion, there was) no measure comparable in effectiveness to the heroic couplet."[61] The logical structure of the couplet, its epigrammatic force, and the possibilities for ironic and satiric statement encouraged by its form aided a poet in creating satire. Pope, for example, states

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[61]Sutherland, Satire, p. 53.

in his "Design" before the Essay on Man:

> I might have set out my moral scheme in prose; but I chose verse, and even rhyme, for two reasons. The one will appear obvious; that principles, maxims, or precepts so written, both strike the reader more strongly at first, and are more easily retained by him afterwards: The other may seem odd, but is true, I found I could express them more shortly this way than in prose itself; and nothing is more certain, than that much of the force as well as the grace of arguments or instructions, depends on their conciseness. I was unable to treat this part of my subject more in detail, without becoming dry and tedious; or more poetically, without sacrificing perspicuity to ornament, without wandering from the precision, or breaking the chain of reasoning....[62]

However, in long poems, the couplet had disadvantages. As Cowper complained, "Long before I thought of commencing poet myself, I have complained and heard others complain of the wearisomeness of such poems. Not that I suppose that tedium the effect of rhyme itself, but rather of the perpetual recurrence of the same pause and cadence, unavoidable in the English couplet".[63] The rhyme, it is important to notice, does not disturb him; it is the repetition of self-contained units. Cowper, in writing his own couplets, therefore, worked to relax the rigidity of the couplet form.

Cowper's couplet is secondary to the sentence and the paragraph. He rarely succeeds in writing a couplet which springs to its mark and penetrates with a quiver the way Pope's couplets do. Cowper breaks them up by spreading the syntax of the sentence through several couplets and even occasionally disrupts that.

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[62]Quoted by Tillotson, The Morality of Pope, p. 30; The Poems of Alexander Pope (ed. J. Butt) (1963), p. 502.

[63]Cowper, Letters, IV, pp. 113-114.

> Born in a climate softer far than our's
> Not form'd like us, with such Herculean pow'rs,
> The Frenchman, easy, debonair, and brisk,
> Give him his lass, his fiddle, and his frisk,
> Is always happy, reign whoever may,
> And laughs the sense of mis'ry far away:
> He drinks his simple bev'rage with a gust;
> And, feasting on an onion and a crust,
> We never feel th' alacrity and joy
> With which he shouts and carols, vive le Roy,
> Fill'd with as much true merriment and glee,
> As if he heard his king say - slave, be free.
> ("Table Talk", 234-245)

Part of the weakening of the couplet occurs by piling up of subordinate and qualifying clauses. The fourth couplet in the quotation above, however, seems to divide two separate independent clauses. The eighth line is confusing. Since it is coupled with the previous sentence, we assume it is the French who feast on an onion and crust, but it cannot be so according to the syntax. This division of the couplet is unwarranted and defeats the reader's expectation to no point, and results in ambiguity.

Cowper also used the parenthesis to loosen the rigidity of the couplet, a practice not new with him and therefore not "in fact, one of his most striking variations from the typical heroic couplet", as W. C. Brown has suggested.[64] Pope had done the same in his satires.[65] The parenthesis extends the limits of the couplet and gains continuity, as can be seen in the following lines discussing the poetry of Pope.

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[64]Wallace Cable Brown, The Triumph of Form (1948), p. 133. Generally however, the best discussion of Cowper's use of the couplet, see especially pp. 132-141.

[65]Pope, "Second Satire, To Mr. Bethel", ll. 49-52:

> Avidien, or his Wife (no matter which
> For him you'll call a dog, and her a bitch)
> Sell their presented partridges, and fruits,
> And humbly live on rabbits and on roots.

But he (his musical finesse was such,
So nice his ear, so delicate his touch)
Made poetry a mere mechanic art;
And every warbler has his tune by heart.
("Table Talk", 652-655)

At other times he uses the parenthesis, as did Pope, to give a personal thrust to a general statement.

The truth is (if the truth may suit your ear,
And prejudice have left a passage clear)
Pride has attain'd its most luxuriant growth,
And poison'd ev'ry virtue in them both.
("Truth", 113-116)

At other times Cowper weakens the couplet by inserting gratuitous lines which contribute little or actually distract from his central purpose.

The Frenchman, first in literary fame,
(Mention him, if you please. Voltaire? - The same)
With spirit, genius, eloquence, supplied,
Liv'd long, wrote much, laugh'd heartily, and died.
("Truth", 303-306)

The parenthesis is rather loosely used both to present truly parenthetical material and at other times as little more than a substitute for a comma setting off an apposition. Its primary function was to give variety, and Cowper uses it with no greater frequency than does Pope.

Cowper does write couplets which develop parallel logical antitheses, but it is not his usual manner.

Throughout mankind, the Christian kind at least,
There dwells a consciousness in ev'ry breast,
That folly ends where genuine hope begins,
And he that finds his heav'n must lose his sins.
("Hope", 635-638)

The repetition of "kind " in the first line lends force to the rhyme with "finds" in the fourth and gives it particular stress. In

lines three and four, the logical antithesis of his thought is expressed in two logical antitheses in the form, each carefully paralleled in the two halves of each line - "ends ... begins" and "finds ... loses", as well as "folly ... hope" and "heav'n ... sins".

Cowper occasionally uses triplets at the end of a verse paragraph and to give emphasis to a point. In "Charity" he uses triplets six times, in each case for emphasis except the final one which completes the poem and one triplet which is a complete verse paragraph. Here is an example of his emphatic use of triplets:

> She speaks of him, her author, guardian friend,
> Whose love knew no beginning, knows no end,
> In language warm as all that love inspires;
> And, in the glow of her intense desires,
> Pants to communicate her noble fires.
> ("Charity", 399-403)

By introducing triplets, Cowper was following a disputed Augustan practice. Dryden had used them as one means of raising his style for the heroic. Swift, however, objected strongly to Pope's use of them in the Iliad and urged him to remove them before the final copy was sent to the printers.[66] Pope uses the triplet, particularly in his Imitations of Horace, with almost as great frequency as Cowper.[67] About half of the time Pope's triplets occur at the opening or closing of a verse paragraph, to heighten the style, but he does not use the triplet for emphasis as regularly as Cowper does.

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[66] Warton, Pope, VII, 79; Warton, Essay, I, 147; Johnson, Lives, III, p. 249;

[67] See esp. "2nd Epistle, 2nd Book", 37-39, 120-122, 171-173; "6th Epistle, 1st Book", 11-13, 60-62, 107-109; "1st Epistle, 1st Book", 107-109, 140-142, 143-145, 152-154, and "The Epilogue to the Satires, Dialogue II", 1-3, 168-170, 205-207.

As well as breaking the rigidity of the couplet by means of triplets and parentheses, Cowper also ignored the couplet as a formal limit for thought. In the two following quotations, for example, he simply disregards the couplet as such and the unit of thought becomes three and four lines, sometimes concluding as in the second example with an alexandrine.

> Look in, and you would swear
> The Babylonian tyrant with a nod
> Had summon'd them to serve his golden god.
> ("Progress of Error", 129-131)

> Is this the rugged path, the steep ascent,
> That virtue points to? Can a life thus spent
> Lead to the bliss she promises the wise,
> Detach the soul from earth, and speed her to the skies?
> ("Progress of Error", 71-74)

Cowper's couplets, then, tend to become units in a larger context, the verse paragraph, and are therefore less aphoristic.

Commonly Cowper ties the couplets of a paragraph together by presenting the subject in the first couplet and the compound predicates in succeeding lines and couplets.

> Man, on the dubious waves of error toss'd
> His ship half founder'd, and his compass lost,
> Sees, far as human optics may command,
> A sleeping fog, and fancies it dry land:
> Spreads all his canvas, ev'ry sinew plies;
> Pants for 't, aims at it, enters it, and dies!
> ("Truth", 1-6)

Such practice gives continuity and works against the tendency toward epigram and lack of movement sometimes felt in the heroic couplet.

This spreading of the principal parts of the sentence into succeeding couplets gives special prominence to the verbs. As noted in the Olney Hymns, Cowper's verbs frequently give life to his verse.

The dinner serv'd, Charles takes his usual stand,
Watches your eye, anticipates command;
Sighs, if perhaps your appetite should fail;
And, if he but suspects a frown, turns pale;
Consults all day your int'rest and your ease,
Richly rewarded if he can but please;
And, proud to make his firm attachment known,
To save your life would nobly risk his own.
(Truth", 213-220)

At other times the verbs are given special stress by being placed at the beginning of each line, thereby gaining stress by parallel structure.

The soul, reposing on assur'd relief,
Feels herself happy amidst all her grief,
Forgets her labour as she toils along,
Weeps tears of joy, and bursts into a song.
("Truth", 455-458)

As Donald Davie has noted in his study, Purity of Diction, "Probably there was something in the metrical exigencies of the couplet which demanded that the verb should beat so sharply into the line, pinning it and making it quiver. At any rate it is true that the best eighteenth-century verse strikes us as active and weighty, governed by forceful verbs".[68]

Sometimes Cowper's verse paragraph is a sentence stated in prose order arranged in decasyllabic lines. The couplet in such instances compresses the meaning and thereby adds strength, but it is not the unit of thought.

These, amidst scenes as waste as if denied,
The common care that waits on all beside,
Wild as if nature there, void of all good,
Play'd only gambols in a frantic mood,
(Yet charge not heav'nly skill with having plann'd
A play-thing world, unworthy of his hand!)
Can see his love, though secret evil lurks

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[68]Davie, pp. 35-36.

> In all we touch, stamp'd plainly on his works;
> Deem life a blessing with its numerous woes,
> Nor spurn away a gift a God bestows.
> ("Hope", 538-547)

Cowper does not entirely diregard the couplet; it is only not a primary unit of composition in the same way it frequently was for Pope.

In conclusion, Cowper relaxed the couplet by using parenthesis to join two couplets, triplets for emphasis, a non-epigrammatic norm, and by using larger units of thought and writing. In all this he was not as far removed from Pope's practice as Brown would have us believe.[69]

As an Evangelical late Augustan, Cowper drew on the resources of classical and biblical poetry. Yet it was inevitable that some conflict would develop between certain aspects of his Evangelicalism and the cooler rationalism of Augustan practice. Satire and its use was the most difficult problem Cowper had to solve as an Evangelical poet.

Evangelical Satire

Satire poses a particularly difficult problem for the moralist. In choosing to write within the conventions of satire, Cowper had to meet the difficulties and resolve them. That he was aware that satire cannot be simply defended as moral is clear from the many places in which he states his intention and his criticism of some kinds of satire.

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[69]Brown, pp. 133-139.

The justification of satire has always been its moral intention, its hope to reform man by laughing him out of his follies. Swift, in The Intelligencer, No. III ("A Vindication of Mr. Gay, and the Beggar's Opera"), gives the traditional statement of intention.

> There are two ends that men propose in writing satire, one of them less noble than the other, as regarding nothing further than personal satisfaction, and pleasure of the writer; but without any view towards personal malice; the other is a public spirit, prompting men of genius and virtue to mend the world as far as they are able. And as both these ends are innocent, so the latter is highly commendable.

According to Cowper, however, "zeal for reform", may be a pretense, a cloak for baser motives.[70]

Cowper is a true Evangelical in his concern with the motivation of human behaviour. Even if a moral effect could be demonstrated, if the motivation is evil, the end result can not be wholly desirable. For a Christian, the crux of the discussion must lie in the relationship of the critic to the one criticized. The New Testament is very specific in outlining the way in which a Christian may reprove a brother. When Peter asked how many times he should forgive his neighbour, Jesus answered, "Seventy times seven".[71] When in conflict, the "soft answer" calms the wrath of an opponent.[72] Jesus always recommended gentle action which had as its aim the reclamation of the back-slider. A member of the

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[70]"Charity", 533.

[71]Matthew xviii. 22.

[72]Proverbs xv. 1.

church was to deal with the sinner privately, and only if unsuccessful was he to return with elders from the church publicly to admonish or expell him from the community.[73] No directions are given for the criticism of those outside the Christian fellowship. Underlying all disciplinary action must be the principle of love outlined in I Corinthians xiii. Cowper, however, justifies the occasional sharpness of his own statements by appealing to the New Testament. "Mildness and meekness", he wrote to Newton in April, 1781, "are not more plainly recommended in Scripture in some instances than sharpness of reproof and severity in others." [74] In the New Testament, there is in every case a respect shown for the individual irrespective of the sin into which he has fallen. The sin is condemned; the sinner is forgiven and restored.

Traditional satire in the early eighteenth-century was frequently personal, and it is this quality which Cowper criticizes. The dangers in its use are many, he complains.[75] Without love, the satirist is more to be blamed than he whom he attacks. Perhaps it is to conceal his own vice that he reveals that of other men in the hope of diverting attention from himself. Almost always the curative dose is too strong. It may be that a gentler method may do more good, while too strong a purgative may destroy. As many satirists admit, it is their poverty rather than a love for virtue which motivates their zeal. Of more consequence, Cowper continues,

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[73] Matthew xviii. 15-17.

[74] Letters, I, p. 291.

[75] "Charity", 491-556.

the mad satirist in his desire to avenge a real or fancied slight sometimes attacks the innocent.

> No skill in swordmanship, however just,
> Can be secure against a madman's thrust;
> And even virtue, so unfairly match'd,
> Although immortal, may be prick'd or scratch'd.
> ("Charity", 509-512)

Cowper also attacks the appetite for scandal to which the satirist panders. An audience is easily gathered to hear a juicy tale, and the identification of the characters by dashes does not prevent recognition of the person discussed. The libel laws should be more strict. Even Arbuthnot and Swift, though Cowper praises them for cleansing the taste of the times, who "with droll sobriety... rais'd a smile/ At folly's cost," are criticized for writing from a wrong motive; they raised a smile but not from any love of virtue. Cowper concludes that any zeal for reform which offends peace and charity is mere pretense. He admires the skill of the satiric poets, but he feels they use their gifts for wrong ends or from wrong motives. Like the armaments on display in the Tower, we admire the craftsmanship but see them as dangerous weapons.

> But though we praise th' exact designer's skill,
> Account them implements of mischief still.
> No works shall find acceptance, in that day
> When all disguises shall be rent away,
> That square not truly with the scripture plan,
> Nor spring from love of God, or love to man.
> ("Charity", 555-560)

Clearly then, for a Christian satire must not be personal.

> An individual is a sacred mark,
> Not to be pierc'd in play, or in the dark;
> But public censure speaks a public foe,
> Unless a zeal for virtue guide the blow.
> ("Expostulation", 434-438)

He may attack sin, if motivated by a love of virtue, but he must spare the sinner.

The early satirists, Dryden, Pope and Swift, as well as Johnson, distinguished between satire properly so called and the lampoon or libel. In the Dictionary, Johnson defines satire as "A poem in which wickedness or folly is censured. Proper satire is distinguished, by the generality of reflections, from a lampoon which is aimed against a particular person; but they are too frequently confounded." Dryden called the lamppon "a dangerous sort of weapon, and for the most part unlawful. We have no moral right on the reputation of other men. 'Tis taking from them what we cannot restore to them."[76] Tatler, No. 242 ("On Raillery and Satire in Themselves") insists satire should only be written by men of good-nature and must be generalized to be effective.

> In all terms of reproof, when the sentence appears to arise from personal hatred or passion, it is not then made the cause of mankind but a misunderstanding between two persons. For this reason the representations of a good-natured man bear a pleasantry in them, which shews there is no malignity at heart, and by consequence they are attended to by his hearers or readers, because they are unprejudiced....It is great vanity to think any one will attend to a thing, because it is your quarrel. You must make your satire the concern of society in general if you would have it regarded.

Addison, in Spectator, No. 451, sees the writer of personal satire as a vicious man. "I cannot but look upon the finest strokes of satire which are aimed at particular persons, and which are supported

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[76] John Dryden, "Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire", Essays, II, p. 79.

even with the appearance of truth, to be the marks of an evil mind and highly criminal in themselves. Infamy, like other punishments, is under the direction and distribution of the magistrate, and not any private person." Personal satire, or the lampoon, therefore, was seen by many to be abusive, a form of "censure written not to reform but to vex".[77] Cowper's complaint, therefore, though expressed in Evangelical terminology, is not eccentric.

The moral problem, however, was not to be solved by merely omitting personal names or aiming at general targets. When satire is generalized, two problems were seen to follow. First, those who should recognize themselves and reform too easily saw only their neighbour's face. "A man who has a good nose at innuendo, smells treason and sedition in the most innocent words that can be put together, and never sees a vice or folly stigmatized, but he finds out one or other of his acquaintance pointed at by the writer."[78] The same complaint was still being made in the middle of the century by The World, No. 9 (1st March 1753):

> ...it is the misfortune of general satire, that few persons will apply it to themselves, while they have the comfort of thinking that it will fit others as well. It is therefore, I am afraid, only furnishing bad people with scandal against their neighbours: for every man flatters himself that he has the art of playing the fool or knave so very secretly, that, though he sees plainly how all else are employed, no mortal can have the cunning to find him out.

Swift in his preface to A Tale of a Tub argues much the same.

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[77] Samuel Johnson, Dictionary, "Lampoon".

[78] Addison, Spectator, No. 568.

> But satire, being levelled at all, is never resented for an offence by any, since every individual person makes bold to understand it of others, and very wisely removes his particular part of the burden upon the shoulders of the world, which are broad enough, and able to bear it.[79]

Swift asked Pope to identify more carefully the objects of his satire in the Dunciad, but there he was more concerned with intelligibility than with pin-pointing the satire.

Further, the innocent are sometimes mistakenly identified with the satire and made to suffer. "A satire should expose nothing but what is corrigible," Addison argues, "and make a due discrimination between those who are, and those who are not the proper objects of it."[80] Mankind as a whole should not be compared downward with the beasts; the purpose of poetry is to show man what he should be.[81]

Secondly, satire when generalized loses its power to deter unless some who are guilty are publically "hanged". The best known defence of personal satire is Pope's letter to Dr. Arbuthnot (26th July 1734) as he revised it for publication. (Arbuthnot, near death, wrote to Pope (17th July 1734) urging him to "study more to reform than chastise" men, though he recognized "the one often cannot be effected without the other".)

> To reform and not to chastise, I am afraid is impossible, and that the best Precepts, as well as the best Laws, would prove of small use, if there were no Examples to inforce them. To attack Vices in the abstract, without

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[79]Swift, Works, I, p. 46.

[80]Addison, Spectator, No. 209.

[81]Cf. Tatler, No. 108.

> touching Persons, may be safe fighting indeed, but it is fighting with Shadows. General propositions are obscure, misty, and uncertain, compar'd with plain, full, and home examples: Precepts only apply to our Reason, which in most men is but weak: Examples are pictures, and strike the Senses, nay raise the Passions, and call in those (the strongest and most general of all motives) to the aid of reformation. Every vicious man makes the case his own; and that is the only way by which such men can be affected, much less deterr'd. So that to chastise is to reform. The only sign by which I found my writing ever did any good, or had any weight, has been that they rais'd the anger of bad men. And my greatest comfort and encouragement to proceed, has been to see, that those who have no shame, and no fear, of any thing else, have appear'd touch'd by my Satires.[82]

Pope is surely right in his argument and is supported by the Tatler, No. 61: "The greatest evils in society are such as no law can come at....On such an occasion, shall it be possible for the malefactor to escape? and is it not lawful to set marks upon persons who live within the law, and do base things? shall not we use the same protection of those laws to punish them, which they have to defend themselves? We shall therefore take it for a very moral action to find a good appellation for offenders, and to turn them into ridicule under feigned names."

But as an Evangelical, such a personal approach was not open to Cowper. To gain the force of personal satire without linking identifiable persons to it, Cowper depends upon "characters", short sketches of various types of men, a practice hallowed by Augustan use.

Cowper's satire is most often alive when he uses a character sketch or a brief allegory to illustrate it. In "Table Talk"

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[82]Pope, Letters, III, p. 419.

(l. 700 f.), Cowper lists qualities which must be possessed if a man may claim a "poet's just pretence". Among the ten qualities which he lists, Cowper includes "a mind/ Skill'd in the characters that form mankind" (ll. 704-705). A poet must be a man who knows the multiplicity of human nature. Not surprisingly Cowper makes extensive use of characteristical satire.

The use of short character sketches of types for satiric purposes was common in the eighteenth century and had a worthy classical antecedent in Horace. The satiric portraits of women found in Pope's "Of the Characters of Women" and Edward Young's "Love of Fame, the Universal Passion" are familiar. The character also occurs frequently in the Spectator and in Johnson's Rambler and Idler essays. All of Cowper's known contributions to the Connoisseur are also character sketches.[83] But the use of "characters" for moral instruction was particularly pronounced among the Puritans and their eighteenth-century counterparts, the Evangelicals. William Law, especially in his A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (1728) was particularly popular among the Evangelicals. Cowper's use of "characters" is similar to Law's; both used them to portray people stained with vice and to portray saintliness.

Cowper's debt to Law is particularly marked; one wishes he had used more "characters" after his style. Law regularly makes his statements as self-evident propositions for two pages and then

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[83]Cf. No. 115. "Letters from Christopher Ironside, and old bachelor [sic], complaining of the indignities received by him from the ladies," The Connoisseur, No. CXV.

moves directly into a description, for example, of "Flavia" and "Miranda", two maiden sisters who both inherit £200 a year, each spending her estate as she pleases.[84] "Flavia" is used to illustrate how the misuse of money and a trivial life can destroy spiritual health. In contrast, "Miranda" is a saint. Cowper adopts both the names and attributes of "Flavia" in "Charity", ll. 453-468, to illustrate a false understanding of charity.[85] Though this is the only instance of a direct borrowing from Law's A Serious Call which I have discovered, Law's method is everywhere obvious in the satires.

The "character", approved by Augustan use, was further endorsed for Cowper by its similarity to the parables of the New Testament. The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son differ little in intention from Cowper's "characters". Jesus preferred the parable rather than propositional statements to convey his message both because a complex truth may be simply conveyed and because a narrative speaks to the total man rather than exclusively to his reason.

James Beattie, whom Cowper was reading in 1784, says in his Essays on Poetry and Music (1776),

> Human affairs and human feelings are universally interesting. There are many who have no great relish for the poetry that delineates only irrational

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[84] William Law, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (1898), pp. 61-65, "Flavia"; pp. 68-75.

[85] "Flavia" also occurs regularly in satires concerning women. Cf. Pope, Moral Essays, "Epistle II. To a Lady, Of the Characters of Women", 87-90; and Edward Young's Love of Fame, "Satire V. On Women".

> or inanimate beings; but to that which exhibits the fortunes, the characters, and the conduct of men, there is hardly any person who does not listen with sympathy and delight....Mere descriptions, however beautiful, and moral reflections, however just, become tiresome where our passions are not occasionally awakened by some event that concerns our fellow-man.[86]

By means of brief character sketches, the main points of concern are more tellingly made because people engross our attention and arouse our emotions in ways no object can.[87] We can identify ourselves easily with each of Cowper's "characters" in the inn scene in "Hope". Sutherland is correct when he says,

> Some of the finest writing in eighteenth-century poetry went into the description of character. Here again the poet usually aims at the typical and general, as in Gay's 'The Birth of the Squire' or in Goldsmith's or Crabbe's sketches of village characters. Goldsmith's schoolmaster in The Deserted Village is typical of his kind, and yet he has enough individuality to mark him out from other country pedagogues. Satire invited the eighteenth-century poet to a more individual treatment.[88]

This interest in the individual continues into the nineteenth with the sketch becoming less typical and more individual. Wordsworth's Michael, for example, is radically different from Cowper's modern pharisee ("Truth", 131-164), and the application of a proper name to him indicates the change. When Cowper names his characters, he usually indicates their character, e.g. "Vinoso", "Sir Smug", "Sir Soph", or "Dubius".

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[86]James Beattie, Essays on Poetry and Music (1776), p. 373; quoted by Sutherland, Preface, p. 111.

[87]Fairchild, Religious Trends in English Poetry, II, p. 135.

[88]Sutherland, Preface to Eighteenth-Century Poetry, p. 27.

In contrast to Goldsmith, Cowper retains the earlier use of the character type. His are always more general; Goldsmith's village schoolmaster and preacher are almost identifiable.

Characteristic satire is Cowper's compromise with his Evangelical principles. His satire has its sting removed largely because its object is rarely personal.[89] There may be a veiled reference to Charles Wesley as an example of sabbath breaking and the misuse of music, but ordinarily his satire is always generalized. He attacks types and vices generally found in society, but he rarely pursues any single individual. Most of the persons identified in the satires are named for praise rather than blame. As a result, his satire is more effective when he personifies vices in short character sketches with all the life and colour of people we know. But they are rarely identifiable with any single person.

John Newton, in the Preface to the 1782 volume, clearly saw what Cowper was attempting.[90] "His satire, if it may be called so, is benevolent, (like the operations of the skilful and humane surgeon, who wounds only to heal,) dictated by a just regard for the honour of God, and indignant grief excited by the profligacy of the age, and a tender compassion for the souls of men."[91] To be

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[89]He had attacked his cousin, Martin Madan, for his advocacy of polygamy, but these verses he insisted on suppressing as far as it was possible.

[90]Not printed until the 5th edition, 1793, though a limited number of the 1st edition included it. See Russell, pp. 42-43.

[91]Milford, The Poetical Works of Cowper, pp. 638-39.

benevolent, satire had its sting removed; or, to extend Newton's simile, the patient should be anaesthetized during the operation, and too often the poems of the first volume have had that effect. Cowper strives primarily to honour God. He is angered by the profligacy of his age, and he maintains a tender compassion for his fellow men.

Why does Cowper fail in writing satire? John Newton was not certain it could be described as satire. Bagehot complained,

> As a scold, we think Cowper failed. He had a great idea of the use of railing, and there are many pages of laudable invective against various vices which we feel no call whatever to defend. But a great vituperator had need to be a great hater; and of any real rage, any such gall and bitterness as great and imitable satirists have in other ages let loose upon man, of any thorough brooding, burning, abiding detestation, he was as incapable as a tame hare....Nor has his language any of the sharp intrusive acumen which divides in sunder both soul and spirit, and makes fierce and unforgettable reviling.[92]

Courthope agrees with Bagehot and gives two reasons for Cowper's failure: He was temperamentally unsuited, and his criteria for judgment were drawn from Evangelicalism.

> Neither nature nor art had qualified him for a satirist. His gentle and affectionate heart rendered him incapable of the fierce invective of Juvenal; his shyness and introspective habits, of the worldly wisdom of Horace. In satire, vice and folly must be judged by the universal standard of Reason; but Cowper refers all his judgments to the sectional Calvinist doctrine of Grace. What he calls satires therefore, are in reality, like those of Wither, long, sermon-like soliloquies, which lack the due sense of proportion.[93]

Hazlitt, in contrast, praised Cowper's satire as being "pointed and

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[92]Walter Bagehot, Literary Studies (1905), vol. I, p. 128.

[93]Courthope, History of English Poetry, Vol. V, p. 352.

forcible, with the polished manners of the gentleman and the honest indignation of the virtuous man."[94] Hazlitt is perceptive in describing the satire as that which a gentle and virtuous man would write. Cowper never loses his temper and is always polite. But these gentlemanly qualities are those which Bagehot and Courthope are criticizing as unsuited to satire. Certainly they speak for the vast majority of those who read Cowper.

More recent critics have also felt it was not quite satire in the traditional sense which Cowper wrote. Professor Sutherland, in his recent study, for example, complains that Cowper's satire is "incidental, and we may suspect that there would be even less of it if Cowper were not an eighteenth-century poet, and if satire had not been the dominant literary mode."[95] Cowper was temperamentally unsuited to write satire, but in the eighteenth century satire was still the genre a writer chose if he wished to speak as a critic of the times. We never quite feel that Cowper is at home with satire. He is ill at ease and uncomfortable. Cowper, though absent from London nearly twenty-years, believed he must write satire if he were to be heard by a larger audience than Olney; otherwise a sermon might have been the thing. At one point Cowper himself suggests that he is envious of the preacher, and had considered taking orders shortly after moving to Huntingdon. Cowper's satire, however, is the gilding of the pill which he

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[94]William Hazlitt, "Lecture V. On Thomson and Cowper", Lectures on the English Poets (1818), p. 184

[95]James Sutherland, English Satire (1958), p. 73.

wishes his former friends to take. He does consult the taste of the times in a variety of other ways in order to catch an audience long enough to make them hear his message.

In discussing "Retirement" in his Clark Lectures for 1959-60, Tillyard gives a just estimate of Cowper's satire at its best.

> Superficially, this satirical account is much like Pope but actually it does not compete. It lacks Pope's fierce astringency, it is poetry of a much lower temperature, but it makes up for this lack by its perfect clarity of vision; and the very coolness and elegance of the satire, so gentle and so unsparing, renders it in its own way supremely effective.[96]
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> (on "Retirement", 473-480)

Generally, however, we prefer the satiric excess of Pope to the too courteous complaints of Cowper. But the problem is much deeper. Too many of the vices Cowper rebukes were of indifferent importance even to his contemporary Christians. He becomes too angry and hysterical over the trivial and thereby loses the support and interest of his readers.

The trouble with Cowper's satire is not its didacticism, but his conception of morality which was too limited. Instead of the shock of recognition which the reader should experience, as he does with Pope, he is only made curious, curious to know what sort of man Cowper was that he should have taken the use of tobacco so seriously.[97] Cowper succeeds only when his view of truth coincides with our own or when he at least makes his view attractive for its

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[96] E.M. Tillyard, Some Mythical Elements in English Literature (1961), p. 105.

[97] Mrs. Unwin, however, used snuff, and he was not offended by Bull's pipe.

own sake. Cowper's attack upon "Occidus" (possibly Charles Wesley) fails because we are so totally out of sympathy with his sabbatarianism, and we can see no reason why one should not spend Sunday evenings playing chamber music with friends.[98] We are puzzled at him who so complains. If he had been writing for an Evangelical audience, we migh have expected this; he was writing, however, for the general and more sophisticated reader. The earlier satirists attack many of the things Cowper does and make us laugh. But Cowper does not wish us just to laugh; he wishes us to join him in a condemnation of such practices. When he does succeed, we laugh with him because we accept his point of view. For satire to be effective, it must win the support of the majority of its readers. If the poet is cut off from the main stream of life, if his scale of values is too different from that of his readers, he succeeds only in appearing querulous and cranky.

One of the most important differences between the satire of Pope and that of Cowper is that Pope is angry about evil which we all accept as evil. In his anger, he may use violent and even repellent imagery.[99] He is triumphant in his scourging (cf. "Epilogue to the Satires", I, ll. 141-150). In contrast, Cowper is annoyed and irritated, but his attempts at fury leave us unmoved and unconvinced. He never offends or outrages our sense of decency as Pope does. One cannot help thinking of Cowper himself when reading in "Expostulation" that Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet;

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[98]"The Progress of Error", 124 ff.

[99]Cf. the nose to tail sequence in "Epilogue to the Satires", II.

> Wept till all Israel heard his bitter cry;
> Stamped with his foot; and smote upon his thigh
> But wept, and stamp'd, and smote his thigh in vain--
> Pleasure is deaf when told of future pain,
> And sounds prophetic are too rough to suit
> Ears long accustom'd to the pleasing lute.
> ("Expostulation", 63-68)

Jeremiah appears as a petulant child, ludicrous in his anger, and Cowper when he acts the same is no more attractive.

Some critics explain Cowper's lack of satiric pressure by saying he complains of that which he has never seen or experienced.[100] Yet Cowper claims to be speaking from personal experience. At the beginning of "The Progress of Error", he states:

> Take, if you can, ye careless and supine,
> Counsel and caution from a voice like mine!
> Truths, that the theorist could never reach,
> And observations taught me, I would teach.
> ("Progress of Error", 9-12)

It is not so much a lack of experience of the worldly life of London as it is a too narrow frame of ethics and morality. Professor Tillotson has observed that

> Pope was a Christian himself, but he set out to be a moralist rather than a Christian moralist, to present a moral scheme which would have been acceptable, say, to Homer and Virgil as it is to Christians. Pope wished to propound something wider in time and place than, historically, Christianity was. To him a Christian colouring was too much a local colouring.... Pope's moral scheme left the Catholic religion for something wider than that: for what has been thought most often, for Nature.[101]

In contrast, Cowper was frightened of a morality divorced from the Christian religion; only the Christian religion interpreted

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[100]Milford, Cowper, Poetry and Prose, p. 6.

[101]Tillotson, The Morality of Pope, pp. 27-28.

through a pietistic ethic provided an adequate safeguard for morality. Cowper retreats from a wider, more tolerant morality to one more narrow and sectarian, and we find we have little common ground to which he can appeal. Although much that Cowper condemns is worthy of condemnation, he rarely moves us to that enthusiasm for truth which makes us wish to forgo our evil ways. We may know we need to be "converted", but he fails to convince us that what he proposes is better than our petty sins.

All too often, Cowper's satire, motivated by a love for virtue, attempts a blow at too general an object and becomes grave morality rather than pointed wit.

> But, lest I seem to sin against a friend,
> And wound the grace I mean to recommend,
>
> . . . . .
>
> Once more I would adopt the graver style--
> A teacher should be sparing of his smile.
> ("Charity", 485-490)

Cowper is rarely a satirist; he is continuously the moral teacher, serious and earnest.

Critical Evaluation and Reception

The public reception given Cowper's first volume was encouraging. He was fearful and excited more for what an unfavourable review would mean to his standing in Olney, however, than in London.[102] Only the Critical Review judged the satires severely. An old school friend, John Duncombe, reviewed the

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[102]Letters, I, pp. 483-84.

volume rather quietly for the Gentleman's Magazine.[103] The critic avows the "great pleasure" with which he read "both the serious and humorous pieces," but prints the short poems "On the Burning of Lord Mansfield's Library" and "An Adjudged Report not to be Found in any of the Books".[104] No detailed criticism is made of the satires.

The two more valuable reviews are those which appeared in the Critical Review and in the Monthly Review.[105] The latter was friendly indeed and may have been written by Edmund Cartwright, a friend of the publisher.[106] After complaining that "most poets have no character at all" and are "only echoes of those who have sung before them" he praises Cowper for his originality.

> For while not only their sentiments and diction are borrowed, but their very modes of thinking, as well as versification, are copied from the said models, discrimination of character must of course be scarcely perceptible. Confining themselves, like pack-horses, to the same beaten track and uniformity of pace, and like them too, having their bells from the same shop, they go jingling along in uninterrupted unison with each other. This, however, is not the case with Mr. Cowper; he is a poet sui generis, for as his notes are peculiar to himself, he classes not with any known species of bards that have preceded him: his style of composition, as well as his modes of thinking, are entirely his own.[107]

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[103] Russell, p. 52.

[104] The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle, Vol. LII (March, 1782), pp. 130-131.

[105] The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature, Vol. LIII (April, 1782), pp. 287-290
The Monthly Review; or, Literary Journal, Vol. LXVII (October, 1782), pp. 262-265.

[106] Russell, p. 52.

[107] The Monthly Review, p. 262

He is praised primarily for being fresh in his diction and in his versification, and the qualities which distinguish his poetry are those qualities generally associated with "scriptural language" and that plainness and simplicity which the hymn writers strove for. "Anxious only to give each image its due prominence and relief, he has wasted no unnecessary attention on grace or embellishment: his language, therefore, though neither strikingly harmonious nor elegant, is plain, forcible, and expressive."[108] The critic of The Monthly Review has discovered exactly those qualities which Cowper had come to prize. He also responds favourably to the serious cast of Cowper's thought. "Mr. Cowper's predominant turn of mind, though serious and devotional, is at the same time dryly humorous and sarcastic. Hence his very religion has a smile that is arch, and his sallies of humour an air that is religious...."[109] The reviewer is at least not unfriendly toward the Evangelical cast of the first volume. His pleasure in the satire is within its limits just.

In contrast, the reviewer for The Critical Review condemns the Poems for those qualities of plainness and simplicity.

> He says what is incontrovertible, and what has already been said over and over, with much gravity, but says nothing new, sprightly, or entertaining; travelling on a plain, level, flat road, with great composure almost through the whole long, and rather tedious volume, which is little better than a dull sermon, in very indifferent verse....If this author had followed the advice given by Caraccioli, and which he has

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[108] Ibid., p. 263

[109] Ibid., p. 262

> chosen for one of the mottos prefixed to these Poems, he would have clothed his indisputable truths in some becoming disguise, and rendered his work much more agreeable. In its present state, we cannot compliment him on its shape or beauty....many of our author's expressions are coarse, vulgar, and unpoetical; such as parrying, pushing by, spitting abhorence, etc.[110]

After quoting from "Conversation", ll. 203-228, he concludes, "our readers will perceive that the wit is rather awkward, /sic/, and the verses, especially the last, very prosaic."[111] His selection of this verse paragraph for comment is particularly interesting because of Cowper's fidelity to Augustan practice. In these lines, Cowper uses colloquial idiom, and diction appropriate to his satire.

> A story, in which native humour reigns,
> Is often useful, always entertains:
> A graver fact, enlisted on your side,
> May furnish illustration, well applied;
> But sedentary weavers of long tales
> Give me the fidgets, and my patience fails.
> 'Tis the most asinine employ on earth,
> To hear them tell of parentage and birth,
> And echo conversations, dull and dry,
> Embellish'd with--He said, and So said I.
> At ev'ry interview their route the same,
> The repetition makes attention lame;
> We bustle up with unsuccessful speed,
> And in the saddest part cry--Droll indeed!
> ("Conversation," 203-216)

The tone is relaxed and conversational as the topic would require. The wit is not so much "awkward" as it is gentle and perhaps a bit old maidish.

The "very prosaic" verses complained of are:

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[110] The Critical Review, pp. 289-290.

[111] Ibid., p. 290.

> Credulous infancy, or age as weak,
> Are fittest auditors for such to seek,
> Who to please others will themselves disgrace;
> Yet please not, but affront you to your face.
> ("Conversation", 225-228)

Apparently it is the irregular pattern of stress which is objected to. Yet this may also be defended as proper for the subject matter. We also know that Cowper consciously roughened his lines to avoid the too "creamy smoothness" of his contemporaries.

As for the satire, although Cowper had attempted sometimes "to be lively, facetious, and satirical," he is "seldom more successful in this than in the serious and pathetic."[112] He praises only the shorter poems in the volume, "written with ease and spirit," and wishes Cowper had confined himself to writing these instead of "entering into a system of ethics, for which his genius seems but ill adapted."[113]

Both reviewers are partially correct in their assessment of Cowper. Those qualities for which the Critical Review condemns him are those, with the exception of his dullness, which he chose as suitable for the purpose of his poetry. His lines are roughened to gain "naturalness" and "simplicity". He is the prophetic preacher speaking in verse to move his readers to repentance and faith. He, therefore, chose those stylistic conventions which he thought proper for his task.

The Evangelical content of Cowper's satires may too easily be exaggerated. With some notable exceptions--his sermons and

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[112] Ibid., p. 290

[113] Ibid., p. 290

interpretations of history and current events--the things he satirizes were conventional and had been attacked by his contemporaries and the satirists writing in the first half of the century. The pattern had been established by Horace and Juvenal and the vices they ridiculed or lashed were faithfully laughed at and whipped in modern dress by Dryden, Pope and Swift. As they followed the Latin poets, so Cowper follows Horace and them. Cowper too satirizes the vanity of women and denounces corruption in high office. Like them he praises the king as Horace had the emperor and Maecenas. Like them he discusses poetry and satire. With Pope, he praises Addison (but does not join in denouncing him), and with Churchill, he ridicules the Grand Tour as a means of finishing a young man's education. As far as content is concerned, Cowper is a late Augustan. By nature he was most fitted to write Horatian satire, polite, genteel and witty. The passion of Juvenal was beyond him. Too frequently, however, the gentle smile is replaced by the preacher's frown.

It is significant, it seems to me, that none of the reviewers saw the satires as Evangelical. Certainly "Retirement" and "Conversation" are almost Horatian. The earlier satires are overtly Evangelical, however, in content and in the way in which he approaches and discusses conventional themes. The true poet must not be just moral but "converted". The loss of liberty and the decline of national power are a result not just of corruption, but show the judging hand of God who chastizes his people to recall them to himself. And to the conventional diction of Augustan satire,

Cowper adds the language of Scripture. Swift and Pope use biblical allusions and brief paraphrases also, but they do not draw on biblical diction and imagery as if it had special authority or power as Cowper does. He is conscious of and uses Augustan literary conventions, but of greater importance to him is the Bible as the word of God. Finally, the Augustan satirists wrote to reform mankind. Cowper became a poet to convert a nation of sinners lost in darkness as well as to amuse himself. Laughter may snip away on occasional offensive vanity from a man, Cowper thought, but it lacks the power to cleanse his guilty stains. Only grace can redeem man, and only the words of the Gospel when rightly preached and heard can convey that grace. Cowper, therefore, wrote conventional satire to win a hearing with the hope that those who came to laugh might stay to pray.

In conclusion, Cowper in his first volume of poetry had turned to a different medium of expression than the hymn, but he was no less an Evangelical. Now writing to the polite world he had left behind rather than for the worshipping community in Olney, he gave an Evangelical witness of his new faith. The first volume is his confession of faith, his <u>apologia</u>, both as an Evangelical and as a poet. As an Evangelical, he satirized the morals rather than the manners and taste of his time. From the Bible he drew inspiration and the content and much of the language for his poetry. As an Evangelical poet, he praised God and preached the Gospel calling men to repentance and warning of wrath to come as the biblical prophets had done. Since love for mankind was difficult to

reconcile with personal satire, he wrote moral essays in the graver style of the preacher, lightened, however, by character sketches and domestic scenes which were to find fuller development in The Task. Nature, the scenic back-drop for his sketches, became increasingly the place where "traces of Eden" could still be found and the beauty of original innocence though marred enjoyed, the place where the enlightened or awakened man could find a closer walk with God.

CHAPTER V

TRACES OF EDEN: THE TASK

> Traces of Eden are still seen below,
> Where mountain, river, forest, field, and grove,
> Remind him of his Maker's power and love.
> ("Retirement" 28-30)

The satires published and better received than he had hoped, Cowper continued writing poetry with more confidence and with the added support and encouragement of friends. His writing distracted his mind from sombre thoughts, and those near to him urged him to continue. In contrast to the many references to the moral satires in his letters, Cowper reveals little concerning his writing of The Task until the poem was complete. In the case of the 1782 volume, Cowper kept Newton informed of his progress. When he wrote The Task, only William Unwin and William Bull knew of his work and that only briefly.[1]

He began writing "The Sofa" in July, 1783 and completed this first book during the early part of the following month.[2] The next reference does not occur until February 22, 1784, when he had completed "four books and part of a fifth."[3] In the same letter, he indicated his plan for six books in all. The whole was probably finished in rough draft by late May, 1784, but his revisions were not completed until October, 1784. His writing appears to have moved on well until Book V, when, as he describes

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[1]Cowper's failure to keep Newton informed was the source of a minor rift between them. Newton had, after all, found Cowper a publisher for the first volume and had done much to encourage him. For details, see Letters, II, pp. 277-278, 285, 291 and 317.

[2]Letters, II, p. 90.

[3]Letters, II, p. 160.

it, his ink froze.[4] He had completed during this same period "Tirocinium", which he had started and laid aside before beginning The Task.[5]

Among others who encouraged him to continue writing was Lady Austen. The story is well known, and Cowper briefly inserted it in the Advertisement to The Task to explain the rather strange title to his first book. "A lady, fond of blank verse, demanded a poem of that kind from the author, and gave him the SOFA for a subject."[6] Before its publication, Newton had questioned the suitability of the title for the whole. That Cowper was aware of some ambiguity is indicated by his letter in answer.

> As to the title, I take it to be the best that is to be had. It is not possible that a book, including such a variety of subjects, and in which no particular one is predominant, should find a title adapted to them all. In such a case, it seemed almost necessary to accommodate the name to the incident that gave birth to the poem; nor does it appear to me, that because I performed more than my task, therefore The Task is not a suitable title. A house would still be a house, though the builder of it should make it ten times as big as he at first intended. I might indeed, following the example of the Sunday newsmonger, call it the Olio. But I should do myself wrong; for though it have much variety, it has, I trust, no confusion.
>
> For the same reason none of the interior titles apply themselves to the contents at large of that book to which they belong.[7]

The first review of the volume raised the question of whether or not it lacked unity, and the question continues to be discussed.[8]

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[4]Ibid.

[5]Letters, II, p. 204.

[6]Works, p. 128.

[7]Letters, II, p. 281.

[8]Morris Golden, In Search of Stability. The Poetry of William Cowper (New York, 1960).

Hazlitt, for example, concluded his comments on The Task: "Every one of these may be considered as distinct studies, or highly-finished cabinet-pieces, arranged without order or coherence."[9] Two recent studies have argued for an implicit unity. Dr. Dorothy Craven, in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, argues for what Cowper called "slight connection."[10] In 1789, when Cowper was called upon to defend the unity of The Task, he argued that it was orderly, but not in the rigid pattern suitable for a discourse but for the kind of poetry he was writing; "...to the several parts of my book of the Task, as well as to each poem in the first volume, /I have given/ that sort of slight connection which poetry demands; for in poetry (except professedly of the didactic kind) a logical precision would be stiff, pedantic, and ridiculous."[11] Dr. Morris Golden, building on Craven's study, sees the connection primarily in psychological terms.

The variety without confusion is partially created by the patterns of association which Cowper followed in writing The Task. In the Advertisement he mentions that "having much leisure," he "connected another subject with it; and pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him, brought forth at length, instead of a trifle which he at first intended, a serious affair--a Volume!"[12] Cowper appears to imply that

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[9]William Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Poets, Second Edition (London, 1819), p. 182.

[10]Dorothy H. Craven, "Cowper's Use of 'Slight Connection' in The Task: a Study of Structure and Style," University of Colorado Studies, Gen. Ser., XXIX, iii (1954), pp. 4-6. (Abstract of a doctoral dissertation)

[11]Letters, III, p. 301.

[12]Works, p. 128.

he had no serious intention in writing The Task, but this statement must be read in the light of other statements and the general audience for which the Advertisement was intended. Variety there is, and the transition from one topic to another is often rather abrupt. The question remains, however, if there is "confusion" or an underlying purpose and pattern to the whole.

In Cowper's mind, at least, there was a definite purpose, and at some point either before writing the poem or at some point during the writing of the first four books, he did develop some intention for the whole.

> If the work cannot boast of a regular plan (in which respect however I do not think it altogether indefensible), it may yet boast, that the reflections are naturally suggested always by the preceding passage, and that except for the fifth book, which is rather of a political aspect, the whole has one tendency: to discountenance the modern enthusiasm after a London life, and to recommend rural ease and leisure, as friendly to the cause of piety and virtue.[13]

The "regular plan", which he implies is there for those who know how to look for it, is further expressed by his more detailed explanation to Newton a month later.

> My principal purpose is to allure the reader, by character, by scenery, by imagery, and such poetical embellishments, to the reading of what may profit him. Subordinately to this, to combat that predilection in favour of a metropolis, that beggars and exhausts the country, by evacuating it of all its principal inhabitants: and collaterally, and as far as is consistent with this double intention, to have a stroke at vice, vanity, and folly wherever I find them.[14]

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[13] Letters, II, pp. 252-53.

[14] Letters, II, pp. 272-73.

In the individual parts and in complete books, Cowper presents characters, scenery, and imagery to lure the reader into the "reflections" which "naturally" arise from the preceding passages. The principle is that of association, but it is an association determined by the mind of the poet ("pursuing the train of thought to which his situation and turn of mind led him") and his understanding of the audience to which he wrote. Cowper again, as in the 1782 volume, arranged The Task in such a way that his readers would not be put off by its religious character.

> What there is of a religious cast in the volume I have thrown towards the end of it, for two reasons: first, that I might not revolt the reader at his entrance,--and secondly, that my best impression might be made last....I make all the concessions I can, that I may please them, but I will not please them at the expense of conscience. 15

Although Cowper was preoccupied with the problems of reaching an audience from which he had long been separated, he did not hesitate to generalize about its vanity and follies.[16] The message, the content, of his poem is not essentially different from that of the satires. He wished to provide profitable reading for his public: to praise rural ease and leisure as friendly to piety and virtue and to attack vice and folly wherever he saw it. That he is not here conditioned by his writing to Newton is apparent from another statement in a letter to Unwin.

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[15] Letters, II, p. 252.

[16] Cowper relied upon the Essays, Moral and Literary (1778) of Vicesimus Knox (1752-1821) for information about the "manners, vices, and follies of the modern day" (Letters, II, p. 260.)

> I can write nothing without aiming at least at usefulness: it were beneath my years to do it, and still more dishonourable to my religion. I know that a reformation of such abuses as I have censured is not to be expected from the efforts of a poet; but to contemplate the world, its follies, its vices, its indifference to duty, and its strenuous attachment to what is evil, and not to reprehend, were to approve it. From this charge at least I shall be clear, for I have neither tacitly nor expressly flattered either its characters or its customs. 17

Cowper's situation was that of rural retirement and domestic tranquility; his turn of mind was whimsical and religious. He failed to pursue the profession for which he was trained, and he was dependent upon others for his livelihood. The purpose of The Task, which also accounts for the unity it has, is determined by these factors.

Under the variety of The Task is the attempt to praise the life of retirement and domestic tranquility as friendly to virtue and piety, and to condemn the life of frenzied activity in an urban environment as indulgent and luxurious, as well as distracting man from realizing his fundamental being as a creature of God, who should join with the rest of creation in praise and adoration of the Creator. It is also an apology for his own life of leisure as worthwhile and meaningful to others. Like the volume of 1782, it calls men to repentance and faith in God.

A detailed reading of the individual books may indicate more particularly the nature of the unity of the whole and the way in which Cowper worked out his purpose.

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[17] Letters, II, p. 251.

Book I: "The Sofa"

The first book of The Task, like those which follow it, is "harmoniously confused". There are themes rather than a subject, though the over-all intention of praising a retired life over one in "gain d evoted cities" does conclude "The Sofa". The landscapes and prospects are a loose framework upon which Cowper hangs his moral digressions, and the walk with Mary which is the frame, once the false beginning is abandoned, provides only the loosest organizing principle. The transitions are sometimes non-existent. The primary unifying factor is the personality of the poet and the general didactic and moral intention of the poem.

The opening hundred lines are particularly bad. Cowper was singularly lacking in self-criticism and these lines reveal him at his most uncritical. The "epic" opening, "I sing the Sofa!", is monstrous whimsy, is absurd grand and rhetorically pretentious. In his attempt to raise the style in keeping with the "august and proud" occasion, his worst stylistic faults appear, especially his tendency to place a polysyllabic Latinate adjective behind its noun: "worms voracious" and "form vermicular". In his attempt to be humorous, he has failed miserably. The careful discrimination of genre of the early Augustans not only has been lost but travestied.

Although Cowper repeats in books I and II his attack on many of the same elements touched on in the moral satires, the tone of "The Sofa" is quite different. A more relaxed attitude toward life is shown, a stress is laid on the pleasures open to all,

especially in nature, and London is praised as well as blamed. The attitude is that though sin doth abound, grace is not entirely ineffectual; though there is much to be condemned, there are some things worthy of praise and to be enjoyed.

Cowper strives for a middle ground between austerity and effeminate ease. The sofa, an invention of social ease, is praise-worthy, but walks and vigorous physical exercise should complement it. Throughout "The Sofa" Cowper stresses the middle state as being most conducive to virtue. Extremes of poverty or wealth make a virtuous life more difficult, and as he had done in the satires, Cowper links variations in climate to this. Omai in the South Seas has a too luxuriant climate, while the extreme cold of the polar regions forces the eskimos into constant war with one another for survival.

This change of tone and the reason for his choice is indicated in the opening lines. He now seeks "repose upon an humbler theme" in response to "the Fair's command" for a song. When he moves to other topics, the tone changes to one more conversational and personal. He presents himself as freely chatting with Mary and the reader from the sofa by his own fireside. The elegant and refined gentleman, courteous and polite, he reminisces with Mary about their walks through the Olney countryside during summer.

Cowper, by introducing the first and best known of his "prospects", insists on the sincerity of his love of nature, that it is not merely a literary convention which prompts him to write in praise of nature (ll. 150-153), and he appeals to Mary to

substantiate his claim. Although Cowper insists on the genuineness of his love for nature, he does follow fairly closely the conventional pattern of the prospect poem. "Windsor Forest" (1713) concerns itself with a nature "harmoniously confused" in this latter Eden where hills, vales, woods and plain all differ yet all agree and an "order in variety" is maintained. Pope uses a brief level "prospect" across cultivated and untrimmed nature to hills in the distance, and he populates the scene with Pan, Pomona, Flora and Ceres.[18] All is worked into a graceful tribute to the Queen. "Grongar Hill", published the same year as Thomson's "Winter" (1726), made the prospect poem popular and defined the elements which were to be repeated by so many others. The point of view is from the top of the hill, though some presentation of the unfolding landscape is presented as he climbs. In the distance, hills, in the valley a sinuous stream winds through plain and wood, sunshine and shade. Beyond the plain, a heavily wooded hill, topped by a ruined tower now the home of ravens, toads, foxes and poisonous adders, commands the attention. Spires rise from villages and on the hillside sheep graze. From gazing at the landscape, moral reflections on the shortness of man's life and the transiency of his works follow. But the "philosophic melancholy", as Thomson describes it, is replaced by the peace and joy of being out in nature away from courts and great places where peace is not to be found.

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[18] Cf. Cowper, Task, VI, "Winter Walk at Noon", ll. 233-35.

More than half a century had passed when Cowper adapted the prospect poem for his own use. Like Thomson with his Amanda, Cowper is accompanied by Mary. Like Dyer, the view is from the top of a hill. From there William and Mary view things close at hand and gradually things more distant: ploughing, the plough-boy reduced by his distance from them to insignificance, the Ouse winding through the plain and grazing cattle. In the far distance, the "sloping land recedes into the clouds". There are the conventional "smoking villages" and spire of the parish church. The eye moves outward and widens in circles, following the pattern set by Dyer. The distant view is replaced by the conventional walk through a colonnade of trees, found also in Thomson; there is the conventional preference for coolness and the sombreness of shade. Another hill-top is climbed from which they view the sheep "whitening" the land. Beyond, the process of hay-making allows a distant view of pastoral labour. Pleasure in the various kinds of trees is indulged in.[19] On the way down the hill, a simple spring is found. They continue their walk through the wilderness, observe threshers at work and delight in the flowers. And the poems ends with nightfall and moonlight "sliding softly in between / The sleeping leaves". Cowper's way of viewing nature is not significantly different from the conventional pattern for the prospect poem in so far as these details are concerned. Even the drawing out of a moral theme is not distinguishing, and

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[19]See Huangs, pp. 125-28, for a brief and, to me, unconvincing discussion of Cowper's use of trees for imagery in his poetry.

there is no single view or attitude in "The Sofa" which may be merely described as Evangelical. Dyer had moralized in much the same way in "Grongar Hill" but without "sermons", and the chief objects of Cowper's complaint are conventional as are his modified praise of London and his attack upon urban values. But no where in Cowper is there a truly "picturesque" prospect. He is able to describe in detail objects close at hand, but he lacks the ability to compose a scene as such. Deane rightly says, "Cowper's lines are too intimate and leisurely in style" for the true prospect poem.[20]

Among the pleasures of nature are the various sounds which he encounters on his walks, and Cowper devotes thirty lines to inanimate and animate sounds, pleasing and unpleasing (ll. 181-209).[21] "Mighty winds" through ancient woods make music like that of the ocean dashed upon a windy shore. The sound of "rills that slip / Through the cleft rock, and, chiming as they fall / Upon loose pebbles" also please. Sweeter still are the sounds of animate nature, the "ten thousand warblers". In a natural setting even harsh sounds become pleasing.

> But cawing rooks, and kites that swim sublime
> In still repeated circles, screaming loud,
> The jay, the pie, and ev'n the boding owl
> That hails the rising moon, have charms for me.
> Sounds inharmonious in themselves and harsh,
> Yet heard in scenes where peace for ever reigns,
> And only there, please highly for their sake.
> (203-209)

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[20] C.V. Deane, Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Nature Poetry (1935) p. 97.

[21] Cf. Letters, II, pp. 244-245.

Wordsworth noting this passage said, "Cowper was passionately fond of natural objects, yet you see he mentions it as a marvellous thing that he could connect pleasure with the cry of the owl. In the same poem he speaks in the same manner of that beautiful plant, the gorse; making in some degree an amiable boast of his loving it, unsightly and unsmooth as it is."[22] Wordsworth here underscores one of the basic differences between Cowper and Thomson. An interest in the rugged and "gothic" was not uncommon in descriptive-didactic poetry; Cowper really is more surprised at himself and his spontaneous pleasure which does not here follow the conventional Augustan taste for the more cultivated.

But harsh sounds in a city setting are not at all pleasant:

> In village or in town, the bay of curs
> Incessant, clinking hammers, grinding wheels,
> And infants clamorous whether pleas'd or pain'd
> (230-232)

displease him. Mentioning of sounds had become conventional in prospect poems, but Cowper does not make full use of them. Only rarely does he relate sounds and make the reader share in the experience.

In contrast, Thomson orchestrates natural sounds into a swelling symphony in "Spring", l. 572f. Goldsmith had a comparable interest in evening sounds in "The Deserted Village", l. 113f. Thomson also mentions "The jay, the rook, the daw, / And each harsh pipe, discordant heard alone, / Aid the full

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[22] William Wordsworth, The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, p. 296.

concert...." ("Spring", ll. 610-612), but their harshness contributes to the overall effect.

In Cowper's use of sounds, as in his handling of the prospect, there is a static quality about the poetry. Lessing had insisted, wrongly I think, that the element of movement was the one quality that may justify the existence of the long descriptive or descriptive-didactic poem.[23] Cowper's descriptions move rather awkwardly forward and into the distance. Also his sounds tend merely to be listed. In contrast both Dyer and especially Thomson sweep the eye around the limits of the scene being described, concentrate on key masses (usually in some way dramatic--cataracts or other things in motion, such as a mighty eagle) and then lead into the far distance. In the same way, Thomson will strike a single note or bird call and then amplify and elaborate it with attendent melodies, complementary and contrasting, by other birds until the air is filled with melodious sound. Cowper is less daring, more reserved, too frightened to attempt the grand manner. When he does venture, the results are flat and thin compared with Thomson. Cowper, however, does more with the small setting and domestic grouping than Thomson does. Thomson strides out of doors in wild and tumultuous weather or with a pounding fervent pulse in the summer. Cowper strolls genteelly forth with Mary on his arm.

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[23] Deane, p. 87.

Though his appeal is largely descriptive and Cowper is sparing in his use of metaphors, he does give to the occasional details a larger context and breathes into them a significance beyond themselves through association. For example, the rude names carved in an alcove suggest man's desire for immortality and by contrast his fear of extinction.

> So strong the zeal t'immortalize himself
> Beats in the breast of man, that ev'n a few
> Few transient years, won from th' abyss abhorr'd
> Of blank oblivion, seem a glorious prize,
> And even to a clown. (I, 284-88)

At other times, a brief incident or scene is given parabolic value and, following the biblical pattern, is used to teach a moral lesson. He stops, for example, to watch the thresher at his work. After his description, he calls the reader to attend.

> Come hither, ye that press your beds of down
> And sleep not: see him sweating o'er his bread
> Before he eats it.--'Tis the primal curse,
> But soften'd into mercy; made the pledge
> Of cheerful days, and nights without a groan.
> (I, 362-66)

It is still, however, his eye for details and his ability to make them immediately present which moves the reader. One of the less familiar examples of this is worth quoting. Notice particularly the way in which Cowper transforms what is frequently a static picture in his poetry to one of motion, a movement interpenetrated with unexpressed meaning which gives to the scene almost symbolic value suggesting the nature of man's life. His description is of a shaded walk at Weston Underwood in the park of the Throckmortons.

How airy and how light the graceful arch,
Yet awful as the consecrated roof
Re-echoing pious anthems! While beneath
The chequer'd earth seems restless as a flood
Brush'd by the wind. So sportive is the light
Shot through the boughs, it dances as they dance,
Shadow and sunshine intermingling quick,
And dark'ning and enlight'ning, as the leaves
Play wanton, ev'ry moment, ev'ry spot.
(I, 341-49)

The constant motion to be seen in nature is shown, however, to be more than a stylistic device; it is a law of life itself. The rough winds toughen the mighty oak, and such exercise by adversity is necessary to man's well being. Thus labour, not ease, brings joy and long life (I, 367-454). So again we circle back to an earlier theme, the opposition between effeminate ease and productive labour.

Men deck their halls with pictures of nature but rarely go for walks in the country. A painting speaks only to the eye; nature to all man's senses. Painting of the distant and foreign is admirable, however, because it presents what we cannot experience directly.

I admire--
None more admires--the painter's magic skill,
Who shows me that which I shall never see,
Conveys a distant country into mine,
And throws Italian light on English walls....
(I, 421-25)

Ease when sought will never be found. It is the end result of purposeful activity. Most men, however, squander their lives in empty activities, as the old card player does.

The paralytic, who can hold her cards,
But cannot play them, borrows a friend's hand
To deal and shuffle, to divide and sort,
Her mingled suits and sequences; and sits,
Spectatress both and spectacle, a sad
And silent cypher, while her proxy plays.
(I, 472-477)

The gaiety sought through feverish activities, however, is not found. Only the innocent are gay; to seek joy through sinful, or at best pointless and meaningless activities, leads only to boredom and ennui.

> But save me from the gaiety of those
> Whose head-aches nail them to a noon-day bed:
> And save me too from their's whose haggard eyes
> Flash desperation, and betray their pangs
> For property stripp'd off by cruel chance;
> From gaiety that fills the bones with pain,
> The mouth with blasphemy, the heart with woe.
> (I, 499-505)

The birds and the hard-working peasant, in contrast, know joy.

Among the elaborations of the descriptive-didactic poem used by Thomson was the brief sketch or tale inserted for variety and the addition of human figures to the landscape to give scale. Cowper's use of the same device is modified, however, by his successful use of "characters" in the satires. The groups he portrays in "The Sofa" are in some cases satiric in intention--the old card player, for example--at other times his use of rustic characters is more conventional and used to lend an exotic touch to the landscape. "Crazy Kate" and the "Gypsies" were selected by the first reviewer of the poem for special notice. Cowper's description of and attitude toward Kate act as a contrast for his portrait of the gypsies and reveals, as already seen in the satires, his insensitivity to human poverty and the social forces which make it. Kate was an ordinary girl, frivolous and in love, until her lover died at sea. Now "craz'd", she roams half clad in rags the waste land where only gorse grows and "begs an idle pin of all she meets". The picture is straight forward and

unsentimental. Her condition was caused by circumstances beyond her control, and she subsists on the charity of individuals in the community. Cowper makes no special plea for her, nor does he turn her into an individual with social value teaching people charity and giving pleasure by providing them with such an opportunity as Wordsworth would have done. Nor does Cowper picture her as in any sense morally superior as a result of her simple life near to nature. Like Cowper, she is a victim of capricious forces beyond her understanding.

The gypsies, in contrast, are described at first by pejorative adjectives indicating strong moral disapproval. They are a "vagabond and useless tribe", their diet is of "flesh obscene of dog, / Or vermin, or, at best, of cock purloin'd." They are thieves who magically convey gold from the pocket of the unsuspecting and are "Loud when they beg, dumb only when they steal". They are brutalized by choice and "self-banish'd" from society. In spite of their hypocrisy and horrid diet, they have "health and gaiety of heart" largely from "breathing wholesome air". Cowper is undecided about them. He is offended by their thieving habits, and he has a gentleman's distate for their vulgarity. Yet they fascinate him. But Cowper does not sentimentalize them, nor does he denounce them roundly for their sins.

Omai, the noble savage from the South Pacific, Cowper had read about in Hawkesworth's Voyages which he was reading while

writing the Task.[24] As with the gypsies, Cowper is again of two minds. Taken from his island, Omai is brought for the amusement of society to London. There, Cowper argues, he sees the vanity of western civilisation, but when returned to his island, he is nostalgic for London. The simplicity of the "gentle savage" provides a contrast to the false sophistication of the city, yet Cowper refuses to idealize the state of nature. Man is by nature sinful and in need of God no matter what his physical setting; Cowper's Evangelicalism preserves him from the sentimentalisation of natural man. His whole taste also would make him favour the cultivated as opposed to the undisciplined and unrefined.

> But, though true worth and virtue in the mild
> And genial soil of cultivated life
> Thrive most, and may perhaps thrive only there,
> Yet not in cities oft: in proud and gay
> And gain-devoted cities. (I, 678-682)

This leads Cowper to attack the city in strong terms.

A city draws to itself, like a common sewer, "the dregs and feculence of ev'ry land" (I, 684). It provides foul examples easily followed by innocent minds. The affluence of an urban society breeds sloth and lust, "wantonness and gluttonness excess". In large cities, such vice is easily hidden or tolerantly viewed. There, so surrounded, virtue cannot hope to succeed. Cowper regularly becomes hysterical when he condemns the city and urbane pursuits.

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[24] Letters, II, pp. 109-110.

Finished with his castigation, however, Cowper recognizes London as the thriving center of the arts. Reynolds excells in portraiture and Bacon in sculpture; commerce and the study of astronomy at their best are seen there. But when his praises cease, the name of "Babylon" is dropped with full effect.

> Babylon of old
> Not more the glory of the earth than she,
> A more accomplish'd world's chief glory now.
> (I, 722-24)

Wickedness in high places goes unpunished while undue harshness is pursued in the punishment of petty thievery and crime. Sunday observance is no more, or only observed by few. One of his most striking and well-known lines then lashes across the argument and opens the concluding verse paragraph.

> God made the country, and man made the town.
> (I, 749)

Tersely, he sums up his discussion. Let the city-bound remain where they are; they would only soil the country as they are rapidly destroying the empire. In the country, the lovers of God and nature, though they lack the sophisticated pleasures of the city, are content.

> At eve
> The moon-beam, sliding softly in between
> The sleeping leaves, is all the light they wish,
> Birds warbling all the music. (I, 761-64)

Thus Cowper allures the reader by characters, scenery and imagery to the moral rather hysterically asserted at the end.

Book II: "The Time-Piece"

The note of prophecy which concludes "The Sofa", that the end of the empire is soon to come, is generalized in "The Time- Piece" to the eschaton, the end of all things. Building generally upon the statement of Jesus concerning the End (Matthew xxiv. 3-24),[25] Cowper reads the "signs of the times" (Matthew xvi. 3) seen in the events of the past year (1783) and particularly those signs revealed in the public life of England which indicate the proximate approach of the Judging God. Special attention is given to two, earthquakes in "divers places" (Sicily) and false prophets who hold the pulpits and the lecterns of the land. Sharing many concerns with "The Progress of Error" and "Expostulation", "The Time-Piece" shows no delight in nature or domestic joys but only moral indignation at the unrighteousness which

[25] Matthew xxiv. 3-24: Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the signs of thy coming, and of the end of the world?
And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.
For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places....And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.
See also Mark xv. 8, Genesis xix. 24-28 and Luke xxi. 25-26:
And then shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring. Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

Cowper felt that his title for this book was especially appropriate, and in defending it to Newton explained the purpose.

> The book to which it belongs is intended to strike the hour that gives notice of approaching judgment, and dealing pretty largely in the signs of the times /Matthew xvi. 3/ seems to be denominated, as it is, with a sufficient degree of accommodation to the subject.[26]

It is intended as prophecy, a warning of judgment to come and a call to national repentance.

"The Time-Piece" opens with Cowper's expressed desire to escape somehow from his awareness of the evil and disorder of the world. In this, he is similar to an Old Testament prophet, who, when called by God to denounce the waywardness of his people, wishes to be released from his unsocial duty. He is not just the prophet, however, but a man like other men, all of whom are sinners suffering under the judgment of God /Romans xi. 32/. For that reason, slavery, or the denial of freedom to any man, should be abandoned. To illustrate God's judgment, he details the calamities which have befallen man within the year (1783): earthquakes, tidal waves, an unusual and heavy fog over Europe and Asia during the summer--all of which he attributes to their final cause--God. This description of God the Judge working out his will in the world is one of Cowper's most magnificent and most biblical imitations. It is essentially patterned on the biblical prophecies, and many details are taken from the Bible.

Letters, II, p. 282.

Alas for Sicily! rude fragments now
Lie scatter'd where the shapely column stood.
Her palaces are dust. In all her streets
The voice of singing and the sprightly chord [Ecl. xii. 6]
Are silent. Revelry, dance, and show,
Suffer a syncope and solemn pause;
While God performs upon the trembling stage
Of his own works his dreadful part alone.
How does the earth receive him?--With what signs
Of gratulation and delight, her king?
Pours she not all her choicest fruits abroad,
Her sweetest flow'rs, aromatic gums,
Disclosing paradise where'er he treads?
She quakes at his approach. Her hollow womb,
Conceiving thunders, through a thousand deeps
And fiery caverns roars beneath his foot.
The hills move lightly, and the mountains smoke, [Psa. cxiv.
For he has touch'd them. From th' extremest point 4,6;
Of elevation down into th' abyss, Psa. clv. 32
His wrath is busy, and his frown is felt. Psa. cxLlv. 5]
The rocks fall headlong, and the vallies rise, [Luke iii. 3;
The rivers die into offensive pools, xxiii. 30]
And, charg'd with putrid verdure, breathe a gross
And mortal nuisance into all the air.
What solid was, by transformation strange,
Grows fluid; and the fixt and rooted earth,
Tormented into billows, heaves and swells,
Or with vortiginous and hideous whirl
Sucks down its prey insatiable. Immense
The tumult and the overthrow, the pangs
And agonies of human and of brute
Multitudes, fugitive on ev'ry side,
And fugitive in vain. The sylvan scene
Migrates uplifted; and, with all its soil
Alighting in far distant fields, finds out
A new possessor, and survives the change.
Ocean has caught the frenzy, and, upwrought
To an enormous and o'erbearing height,
Not by a mighty wind, but by that voice [Matthew viii. 27;
Which winds and waves obey, invades the shore Psa. cvii. 25]
Resistless. Never such a sudden flood,
Upridg'd so high, and sent on such a charge,
Possess'd an island scene. Where now the throng
That press'd the beach, and, hasty to depart,
Look'd to the sea for safety? They are gone,
Gone with the refluent wave into the deep--
A prince with half his people! (II, 75-121)

The year had been one of natural calamaties in Western Europe. Strange and terrible events had happened for which there was little

explanation. But the most terrifying and "unnatural" catastrophe of the year, was a series of earthquakes which struck Calabria and Sicily from February 5th to May 23rd and a second series beginning at 1 a.m. on July 29th and again on August 9th. The estimated dead in excess of 40,000. An "Abstract of Sir William Hamilton's Account of the late Earthquake in Calabria and Sicily" was published in the Gentleman's Magazine for September, 1783, which Cowper may have read, and it may be the source for some details in Cowper's account.

> The prince of Scilla, fearing that the rock of Scilla, on which the town and castle stood might be detached into the sea, as, during the first shock of Feb. 5 at noon, part of a rock had been, was returning with 2473 of his subjects, to a little port or beach, surrounded by rocks at its foot. About midnight a second shock detached a whole mountain, much higher than that of Scilla, between it and the terre del cavallo, which, falling into the sea, then perfectly calm, raised the wave which broke on the point of the Faro in Sicily, and returning on the beach at Scilla, swept off, or dashed against the rocks, the unhappy prince and all the people with him, and was immediately followed by one or two more waves less considerable.

At the end of his account, he finds

> a great conformity between those accounts and our Lord's prediction of events that were to precede (how closely we are left to conjecture from circumstances) the general dissolution of this globe? See Matth. xxiv. 7; Mark xv. 8; but particularly Luke xxi. 25, 26. And is not the destruction of the cities of the plain, perhaps by the first earthquake after the creation, recorded in Genesis, xix. 24-28, an exact counterpart of what happened in the plain of Calabria?

He proceeds to draw out the physical parallels to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorah and concludes, "Innumerable are the earthquakes recorded in history, in a general and superficial way. It was reserved for this age to explore their causes and to trace their

effects in detail.--Let us be wise, and consider these things."

Sir William's account is particularly interesting for the wa in which it blends the emerging scientific outlook which rationalizes biblical miracles and examines proximate causation objectively with an almost superstitious fear concerning the ultimate meaning and final cause of natural events. Cowper's reading of natural calamities in eschatalogical terms, therefore, was shared by many who were in other ways largely unsympathetic to his Evangelicalism.

Reading of the book of Providence, Cowper calls "happy" the man who sees in such calamities "the will / And arbitration wise of the Supreme" (II, 161-165). To attribute these events to Chance or Fate would suggest that God did not control his creation or take care over it. To stop at secondary causes and to discuss natural calamities only in terms of natural physical laws may be an attempt to deny God's very existence. In any case, to concern one's self with secondary causation, is to discuss only the means by which God, the final cause, has always chosen to work, and perhaps to fail to read the necessary lesson--a warning and a reproof for sin.

Book II, therefore, goes beyond common ground to the more narrowly Evangelical. It is a general application of the texts which Sir William lists. These texts, the words of Jesus concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the Last Things, list two primary "signs" of the End: natural calamities and the appearance of false ministers. Having presented his interpretation of the earthquake in Sicily, Cowper devotes the

second half of the poem to a condemnation of the effeminacy which has so dishonoured England and her leaders and of false priests who must accept responsibility for this national moral decline. The poet's right and responsibility to criticize his age had been fully asserted in the satires. Here again he repeats his desire to be useful.

> Studious of song,
> And yet ambitious not to sing in vain,
> I would not trifle merely, though the world
> Be loudest in their praise who do no more.
> (II, 311-14)

But he recognizes how ineffectual poetry, even satiric poetry, is to lead men back to virtue. The poet cannot be blamed for failing; only the faithful clergy are custodians of the power adequate to save fallen man. The pulpit

> Must stand acknowledg'd, while the world shall stand,
> The most important and effectual guard,
> Support, and ornament, of virtue's cause.
> There stands the messenger of truth: there stands
> The legate of the skies! --His theme divine,
> His office sacred, his credentials clear.
> (II, 334-39)

If the nation is floundering in sin, it is because the clergy have failed in their responsibility both to the people and to God. Carefully and fully he proceeds to lash the effeminacy, vanity, and pride of the clergy, contrasting them with the "true preacher of the Word". Milton had done much the same in "Lycidas", but Cowper adds the belief that little can be done before the End comes. The true preacher is characterized by warmth of heart, purity of life and doctrine; he is "simple, grave, sincere,

> ...in language plain,
> And plain in manner; decent, solemn, chaste,
> And natural in gesture; much impress'd
> Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
> And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
> May feel it too; affectionate in look,
> And tender in address, as well becomes
> A messenger of grace to guilty men.[27]
> (II, 400-407)

Again and again he stresses the importance of "divine simplicity in him / Who handles things divine" (II, 432-33).

The description of the many affectations of the clergy recurs and holds his attention more than the simplicity of the true minister; Cowper's enjoyment of spirited denunciation is plain, and some of the better writing in "The Time-Piece" occurs in these passages in which he presents small pictures or character sketches of the false clergy. One affectation he condemns is their tendency to parade learning, especially that drawn from the "wisdom" of pagan philosophers of Greece and Rome.

> 'Tis revelation satisfies all doubts,
> Explains all mysteries, except her own,
> And so illuminates the path of life,
> That fools discover it, and stray no more. [Isaiah xxxv. 8]
> (II, 527-30)

The laity, misled by false teachers, offended by their effeminate affectations, make alternative false gods to worship: manners and, especially, dress wherein "variety", or constantly changing fashions, leads too many to extravagance at the expense of basic, simple human needs for warmth and food. All, led by the clergy, fall into gross effeminacy and affectation, wasting

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[27]Compare Goldsmith's good priest in "The Deserted Village", ll. 159-62.

time and squandering fortune.

> There we grow early gray, but never wise;
> There form connexions, but acquire no friend;
> Solicit pleasure, hopeless of success;
> Waste youth in occupations only fit
> For second childhood, and devote old age
> To sports which only childhood could excuse.
> There they are happiest who dissemble best
> Their weariness; and they the most polite
> Who squander time and treasure with a smile,
> Though at their own destruction.
> (II, 633-42)

Still searching out the causes of national moral decay, Cowper uncovers "profusion" (our modern "affluent society") as the father of all these vanities. And the cause of profusion, or the inability to use time and money reasonably, lies with the loss of "discipline" in the colleges and universities. Cowper belabours the universities and schools as seminaries of vice and corruption, excepting only a few teachers among whom he praises his late brother as an example.

"The Time-Piece" shows Cowper's preoccupation with the evil in man and its particular expression when units of society larger than the village occur. Although he calls it a fearful spectacle, he has in this book shown more interest in the evil than in the good and true. The hysterical note, for example, is seen in the following description almost mediaeval in outlook.

> And 'tis a fearful spectacle to see
> So many maniacs dancing in their chains,
> They gaze upon the links that hold them fast
> With eyes of anguish, execrate their lot,
> Then shake them in despair, and dance again.
> (II, 662-66)

His vision of the horror of man's bondage to sin is accompanied by a sense of the need for someone to tell them of the liberty made

possible through grace. Although the poet has neither the authority and power nor the credentials of the preacher, since the pulpit has sunk to such a low state, the poet must do what he can. The Gospel must not go unheard,--but he has few illusions about the power of poetry to transform men; as he states in the second verse paragraph of "The Garden":

> Since pulpits fail, and sounding-boards reflect
> Most part an empty ineffectual sound,
> What chance that I, to fame so little known,
> Nor conversant with men or manners much,
> Should speak to purpose, or with better hope
> Crack the satiric thong? 'Twere wiser far
> For me, enamour'd of sequester'd scenes,
> And charm'd with rural beauty, to repose,
> Where chance may throw me, beneath elm or vine,
> My languid limbs, when summer sears the plains;
> Or, when rough winter rages, on the soft
> And shelter'd Sofa, while the nitrous air
> Feeds a blue flame, and makes a cheerful hearth;
> There, undisturb'd by folly, and appriz'd
> How great the danger of disturbing her,
> To muse in silence, or at least confine
> Remarks that gall so many to the few
> My partners in retreat. Disgust conceal'd
> Is oft-times proof of wisdom, when the fault
> Is obstinate, and cure beyond our reach.
> (III, 21-40)

"The Time-Piece", the most like the moral satires in content, purpose, and execution, is the only part of The Task which excludes any reference to nature or the pleasures to be found there. It is in many ways a violation of the general tone of The Task. As with the 1782 volume, Cowper has placed the least palatable piece second. Cowper himself clearly considered Book II as a degression into "thickets and brakes entangled", as he states at the beginning of Book III. In the first book, the city and

country are contrasted. With the beginning of "The Garden", he turns to domestic happiness as the best "nurse of virtue".

Book III: "The Garden"

At the beginning of "The Garden", Cowper recalls that he was to "adorn the Sofa with eulogium due / To tell its slumbers, and to paint its dreams" but has "rambled wide" (III, 12-14). Now disengaged from the mud, "with pleasant pace, a cleanlier road / I mean to tread" (III, 17-18). Cowper follows Locke's principle of association in building his moral reflections associationally from concrete objects in nature. This allows him to ramble and digress, but it also results in the more memorable lines of The Task.

This cleanlier road, domestic happiness in a rural retreat as the nurse of virtue, is one of the central themes of The Task and is important in Cowper's justification of his own life. Significantly, he identifies domestic happiness as the only bliss of Paradise to have survived the Fall (III, 39-40). "The Garden" is the primary defence of his life of retirement in seeming idleness dependent upon the charity of friends and relatives for his livelihood. There are essentially three arguments which he uses in this defence: (1) Domestic happiness is an innocent pleasure in contrast to urban pursuits, (2) it has spiritual value both to him who so lives and indirectly for those who lead a more active life, and (3) it is necessary because of his peculiar personal needs.

At least one of the reasons his attacks on urban pursuits is so strident and hysterical may be his felt need to defend his own

life. Certainly he is frequently at his least critical, morally as well as poetically, when he lashes the town. Early in "The Garden" he illustrates the decay of moral sensitivity in the city by noting that the social stigma against adultery had declined, and the adultress was now welcomed in all the best circles. Vice, which in the past cloaked itself in the appearance of virtue, thereby at least indirectly praising it, now finds the mask no longer necessary and brazenly struts the streets. Here again Cowper reveals an unforgiving attitude toward those who have outraged his moral sense and seems unable to separate the sinner from his sins. He is typically Evangelical in rejecting the moral ambiguity which exists in accepting the unrepentant sinner and the loss of a sense of moral order which may result, but he fails to recognize the moral ambiguity implicit in his own doctrine of grace which insists that all have fallen and that to all is extended God's forgiveness. Cowper wants to make certain that non-elect sinners get their just reward, though grace exempts the Christian sinner.

If the social order accepts and condones flagrant sin, only one way is left to the poet and friend of virtue: retreat from the city.

> I was a stricken deer, that left the herd
> Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt
> My panting side was charg'd, when I withdrew
> To seek a tranquil death in distant shades.
> There was I found by one who had himself
> Been hurt by th' archers. In his side he bore,
> And in his hands and feet, the cruel scars.
> With gentle force soliciting the darts,
> He drew them forth, and heal'd, and bade me live.
> Since then, with few associates, in remote
> And silent woods I wander, far from those

My former partners of the peopled scene;
With few associates, and not wishing more.
Here much I ruminate, as much I may,
With other views of men and manners now
Than once, and others of a life to come.[28]
(III, 108-123)

By his injection of the personal at this point in his argument, Cowper brings forward the defence of his life. The lines themselves are ambiguous, however, and an unpleasant tone of self-pity creeps in. He presents himself as a parallel with Christ who also was afflicted and rejected by men. His fellow sufferer, Jesus heals his wounds and bids him live. Cowper appears to have confused his references, however. He, metaphorically, is the "stricken dear", and the "herd" refers to his London associates. He has left the herd, not by choice, but because "archers" have "deep infixit" many arrows in his side. "Archers", though plural, must refer to God at least as final cause.[29] But the archers who wounded Jesus must be sinful mankind and the forces of evil arrayed against the righteous. Granting the tendency in Evangelical theology to over-stress the sacrificial aspects of the atonement, it is not easy to identify the archers with God in this case except as a permissive final cause. If all things are in God's hands and under his control, however, he is the ultimate power

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[28]The idea of flight from pursuers was not new with Cowper. See Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village", where he uses a similar metaphor to express a similar idea:

And as a hare, whom hounds and horns pursue,
Pants to the place from where at first she flew,
I still had hopes, my long vexations pass'd,
Here to return--and die at home at last.
(ll. 93-96)

[29]Golden, pp. 129-35.

behind the archers.

Though perhaps the most frequently quoted passage in The Task, it displays a number of Cowper's characteristic weaknesses. Cowper is usually best in his choice of verbs, but his selection of "withdrew" to describe the flight of the deer from his pursuers, is much too weak and contrasts badly with the "panting" state of the deer. "Gentle force soliciting the darts", however, effectively describes the healing work of grace. "Ruminate" may reveal his insensitivity to language. Certainly he could defend his usage as far as meaning is concerned, but within this context it is indeed unfortunate. The picture of the stricken deer chewing the cud of his alienation is unpleasant.

By living a retired life, Cowper is obeying the special providence of God in relation to himself. In contrast to his apparent idleness, the busy life of others is only apparently worthwhile. He finds them engrossed in idle fancies and empty activities worse than idleness, spending the

> little wick of life's poor shallow lamp
> In playing tricks with nature, giving laws
> To distant worlds, and trifling in their own.
> (III, 164-166)

He reminds those absorbed in

> dropping buckets into empty wells,
> And growing old in drawing nothing up

that a severe judge calls to a "sharp reckoning" those who have lived in vain.[30] Again we find him concerned with the Evangelical

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[30]Goldwin Smith complained, "The worst passages are those which betray a fanatical antipathy to natural science, especially that in the third book (ll. 150-190)." Cowper, London, 1902, p. 75.

stress on the stewardship of time and money.

Throughout The Task, Cowper attacks urban society for its violation of these principles by wasting their time and money on trivialities. But in doing so, he only raises more glaringly the need to justify his own life.

He defends his meddling criticism of his fellows by asserting his brotherhood with them. As he is a man like other men, he must recall them from their folly and headlong flight into destruction.

> Neither can I rest
> A silent witness of the headlong rage
> Or heedless folly by which thousands die,
> Bone of my bone, and kindred souls to mine.
> (III, 217-220)

Through his concern for the spiritual welfare of others, Cowper argues for the usefulness of his own life.

The chief obstacle to the spiritual well-being of man is his continuous attempt to rely upon his own wisdom rather than upon God's. Cowper, therefore, particularly attacks man's attempt by unenlightened reason to mount through nature up to nature's God. Only by understanding the Book of Revelation, the Bible, can one rightly read nature, the Book of Creation, a helpful commentary on Holy Scripture. In asserting this, Cowper carefully does not reject reason rightly used.

> Philosophy baptiz'd
> In the pure fountain of eternal love,
> Has eyes indeed; and, viewing all she sees
> As meant to indicate a God to man,
> Gives him his praise, and forfeits not her own"
> (III, 243-47)

In past days, there were those learned men who kept their priorities

straight; Newton, Milton, and Hale honoured God and found him reflected in his creation. Nature is a source of knowledge about God but not that necessary to salvation; Cowper insists on its secondary role in relation to biblical revelation.

With a brief transitional paragraph on the vanity of man's activities, especially his pursuit of truth while refusing to recognize the "Truth" as embodied in Jesus Christ, Cowper returns to the major theme of "domestic life in rural leisure pass'd" (III, 292) as a friend of virtue. More often than not, those who talk of preferring rural retirement violate the "silence and shade" with blood and raucous noise. The hunt is especially barbarous, and the use of rural settings for noisy feasts of peagantry and song is only less so. These re-enact the violation of the Garden first done by our primal parents. By contrast, Cowper mentions his affectionate care of his hare.

Defending his own life as valuable and not "idle" as the "busy world" may esteem it, he presents the usual Augustan portrait of the occupations of a retired gentleman in his garden. Occupied by "friends, books, a garden, and perhaps his pen,

> Delightful industry enjoy'd at home,
> And nature in her cultivated trim
> Dress'd to his taste, inviting him abroad--
> Can he want occupation who has these?
> Will he be idle who has much t'enjoy?
> Me, therefore, studious of laborious ease,
> Not slothful; happy to deceive the time, /Ephesians v. 16/
> Not waste it; and aware that human life
> Is but a loan to be repaid with use.
> (III, 355-64)

His employment is the service of mankind, a social not a dissipated

life. And in this service, he is a seeker after wisdom, which he in turn endeavours to transmit to other men. He is not, therefore, idle who so labours.

A detailed description follows, essentially a Virgilian Georgic, on his care and cultivation of the garden, especially the preparation of a hot frame and the cultivation and growth of cucumbers.[31] Cowper's use of gardening had a wide support in his time as a proper activity for the Christian. Addison, in the Spectator, No. 477, well presented the view held earlier in the century.

> You must know, sir, that I look upon the pleasure which we take in a garden as one of the most innocent delights in human life. A garden was the habitation of our first parents before the fall. It is naturally apt to fill the mind with calmness and tranquility, and to lay all its turbulent passions to rest. It gives us a great insight into the contrivance and wisdom of Providence, and suggests innumberable subjects for meditation. I cannot but think the very complacency and satisfaction which a man takes in these works of nature to be a laudable, if not virtuous habit of mind.

Wesley had recommended gardening as a good Christian recreation--active, not passive, creative, not consuming time or money wrongly. Beach has well stated:

> A secluded landscape may be broadly said to consist of "objects that excite no morbid passions". This is one obvious reason why gentle philosophic poets prefer country views to the streets of cities. The streets of cities are apt to arouse morbid feelings and disquietude, being full of so many objects associated with our ambitions, anxieties, jealousies and ill-regulated passions. The city-dweller at least is likely to resort to the country for relief from

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[31] Cf. Virgil, The Georgics, Book II, l. 535f. Also see Cowper's praise of Virgil and Horace; Letters, II, 193 and 264.

the pressure of his worldly concerns.[32]

Cowper's defence of his life is set within an Augustan, Christian context which associates him with at least a literary ideal of life in his age. He claims to live the life others only praise from huddled, hectic city streets. The reality, he insists, is even better than the literary descriptions of it. Thus occupied, he lives his retired life.

Some of Cowper's weaker passages in The Task occur when he is trapped by the conventional themes of his century. "The Garden" presents a number of such pitfalls for him while at the same time instructive and helpful in placing Cowper in his Augustan background. The misconceived Georgic on the cucumber is a case in point. Cowper cites others who included praise of common labour in their poems following the example of Virgil, especially John Philips' "The Splendid Shilling" (1701). If others have sung the praise of gnats and frogs and mice "in ennobling strains" he may sing the growing of cucumbers. The Georgic requires great skill if the elevated style and diction used to describe a lowly process is not to slip into the ridiculous. When Cowper wishes to heighten a passage, he invariably turns to Milton and Latinate adjectives.

> The stable yields a stercoraceous heap,
> Impregnated with quick fermenting salts,
> And potent to resist the freezing blast:
> For, ere the beech and elm have cast their leaf
> Deciduous, when now November dark
> Checks vegetation in the torpid plant
> Expos'd to his cold breath, the task begins.

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[32]Beach, p. 40.

> Warily, therefore, and with prudent heed,
> He seeks a favour'd spot; that where he builds
> Th' agglomerated pile his frame may front
> The sun's meridian disk, and at the back
> Enjoy close shelter, wall, or reeds, or hedge
> Impervious to the wind. (III, 463-475)

The Latinate adjectives are cumbersome and pompous; "stercoraceous heap" and "agglomerated pile" are ways of bringing dung heaps into poetry and prior usage may be argued for justification, but in both instances above, it is ponderous and heavy while the Georgic must retain a lightness in tone and manner if it is to succeed. Cowper's, at times infuriating, practice of using a polysyllabic Latinate adjective following its noun ("leaf deciduous") invariably appears when he attempts to heighten his style. The practice is Miltonic, but when Milton uses it, and Pope at times, the Latin meaning of the word lends extra strength and the sound a resonance to the line. But the dangers are great, and the bulk of much eighteenth-century poetry shows how fatal Milton's influence could be. Here, however, Cowper follows a poetic convention uncritically and unskillfully.

Cowper fails again in "The Garden" when he attempts to satirize the popular taste for landscape gardening (ll. 624-674, 764-810) and the building and rebuilding of estates under the hand of "Capability" Brown. Cowper repeats many of the complaints of Pope's "Epistle to Burlington", but with much less effect. The vulgar taste of the newly rich are attacked by Cowper too exclusively from a moral point of view rather than one of taste. Pope is more concerned to attack their vulgarity and sees their extravagance as contributing to the general economy (ll. 169-172).

Pope's range is much greater, as well, and more grand. Cowper in contrast is less concerned with taste than he is with the shocking misuse of time and money. Behind his discussion is the New Testament injunction against the building of bigger barns and the laying up of treasure on earth (Luke xii. 13-34). Such display for Cowper ends with vulgarity, but more importantly with a wasted life and fortune. His concern with gardening is to place it within a Christian, even Evangelical, perspective.

Gardening, as well as every other innocent activity, may be misused. It may be an expression of human vanity and perverse taste, or it may reflect a love and admiration of God the Creator and thereby become a part of a life of praise. A garden, therefore, may become the ideal place in which to retire to examine one's life and to pray.

Such a retirement into nature will not, as he had argued previously in "Retirement", restore man to a right relationship to God, but it provides peace and frees the mind from "all assaults of evil". It may be courageous to fight evil, but it is safer to fly temptation. With this point of view Goldsmith agreed in "The Deserted Village".

> Who quits a world where strong temptations try;
> And, since 'tis hard to combat, learns to fly!
> (101-102)

Cowper echoes the statement in his lines:

> When fierce temptation, seconded within
> By traitor appetite, and arm'd with darts
> Temper'd in hell, invades the throbbing breast,
> To combat may be glorious, and success
> Perhaps may crown us; but to fly is safe.
> (III, 684-88)

In rural retirement he finds health, productive leisure, friendship, peace, a wandering muse, and a constant occupation without care. So blessed, he draws for all the world a picture of his bliss.

> I therefore recommend, though at the risk
> Of popular disgust, yet boldly still,
> The cause of piety and sacred truth,
> And virtue, and those scenes which God ordain'd
> Should best secure them and promote them most;
> Scenes that I love, and with regret perceive
> Forsak'n, or through folly not enjoy'd.
> (III, 705-11)

His taste for nature is not merely personal; he recognizes it as universal. Nature too is not something which can only be enjoyed by the mystic with his private relationship with God.

> Nature, enchanting Nature, in whose form
> And lineaments divine I trace a hand
> That errs not, and find raptures still renew'd,
> Is free to all men--universal prize.
> (III, 721-24)

With nature free and available, he finds it strange that men should flood to cities. Sensual and luxurious indulgence is the cause, and the city provides more opportunity to indulge one's vices than does the country.

Once more we come full circle. London is condemned and now is compared to Sodom, a city less corrupt. All that saves London from God's immediate judgment is the presence of at least a small group of righteous men, a theme to which he returns at the end of Book VI. On this solemn note, "The Garden" ends.

Cowper again uses the same digressive ordering of his argument as he did in Book I. Instead of launching an attack from

his own Evangelical point of view, as he did in "The Time-Piece", he moves to a common ground with his readers. Praise of the retired life was common, and nature was frequently urged as the best locale for that retirement. Yet those who so argued rarely ventured into the countryside themselves, were content to talk of it in town and to view it through painting and picturesque poetry. Once having given a fairly traditional treatment to the retired life and, he hoped, having won the reader to an attitude of listening, he challenges the genuineness of the oft repeated praise of nature and calls the reader to act on his own values. Only then does he become the more explicit Evangelical preacher presenting the whole plan of retirement as a means to a closer walk with God.

Book IV: "The Winter Evening"

The three concluding books of The Task follow generally from Book III. Each picks up themes stated in "The Garden" and develops them more fully. Winter, the high season in London, is the time of the year when all who can, gravitate to the city for its life and excitement. But, Cowper argues, winter in the country, though usually thought of as disagreeable, can be a high season as well, and far more desirable than that of London. Book IV attempts to share the pleasures of a winter's evening, noting in passing its hard effects on the poor, and to contrast the lesser joys of London.

The book opens with the arrival of the post bringing newspapers filled with events in the city. In contrast to that

hurly-burly, domestic happiness quietly ushers in the evening.

> Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast,
> Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round,
> And, while the bubbling and loud-hissing urn
> Throws up a steamy column, and the cups,
> That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each,
> So let us welcome peaceful ev'ning in.
> (IV, 36-41)

Following tea, Cowper settles to his reading while Mary and Lady Austen pursue their needle-work. Diversions are amply present; music is performed by themselves and he reads aloud from books of travel. A simple supper past, they go peacefully to bed. Cowper's retirement is not without windows on the world. He derives more pleasure from reading of events at his own fireside, however, than by participating in them.

Cowper not infrequently adapts Horace and Virgil for Christian purposes, and ll. 168-193, of "The Winter Evening" are an example. The evening enjoyments are displayed as parallel to those of the Roman Empire when simplicity and frugality were prized. Into this setting, he introduces Christian worship, inappropriate for the Roman context.

> Nor, do we madly, like an impious world,
> Who deem religion frenzy, and the God
> That made them an intruder on their joys,
> Start at his name, or deem his praise
> A jarring note. (IV, 177-181)

From the traditional Augustan setting he diverges and concludes with the superiority of Christian retirement over Horatian.

> Oh ev'nings worthy of the Gods! exclaim'd
> The Sabine bard. Oh ev'nings, I reply,
> More to be priz'd and coveted than yours,
> As more illumin'd, and with nobler truths,
> That I, and mine, and those we love, enjoy.
> (IV, 189-193)

The classical archetype, however, is more than a lead-in for Cowper's religious statement. The one complements the other and gives to parochial Christian views the larger claim of universality. Augustan values are sound, but they need the addition of Christian revelation to be complete.

Outside the house, winter is darkly present. The winter, wet and windy with icy snows, provides an effective, sombre contrast to the warmth about the hearth. Winter in London, as Cowper presents it, is a continual round of questionable and vicious activities, at least according to Evangelical standards, which "palliate dullness, and give time a shove" (IV, 210). Thus Cowper introduces the two settings within which this book will move.

The fifth verse paragraph, presented as a contrast to rural retirement, is a verse diatribe against urban amusements, particularly the theatre, card playing, and dice and billiards. Whereas in the preceding paragraph he had based his statements on a more general view, that of the praise of a retired life, Cowper here becomes narrow and his satire becomes rant. Unfortunately Cowper too frequently is led off by his desire to be useful through moral criticism and thereby loses control. The whole of Book II is such a digression, and in the particular lines under discussion, he appears to recognize some loss of control. But as noted before, even when he acknowledges that he has drifted, he fails to omit the lines.

> But truce with censure. Roving as I rove,
> Where shall I find an end, or how proceed?
> As he that travels far oft turns aside
> To view some rugged rock or mould'ring tow'r,
> Which, seen, delights him not; then, coming home,

Describes and prints it, that the world may know
How far he went for what was nothing worth;
So I, with brush in hand and pallet spread,
With colours mix'd for a far diff'rent use,
Paint cards and dolls, and ev'ry idle thing
That fancy finds in her excursive flights.
(IV, 232-242)

Cowper's lack of self-criticism is matched only by his inability to discard lines after he has written them. Many such statements, however, are conventional and more polite gestures than meaningful statements. Such an associational method allowed much freedom and owes more to Locke than to Aristotle and Horace.

An invocation to evening is given with what has now become a thematic statement: winter as the "season of peace". Beside the fire he drowses and dreams. (Such unthinking fancy and dreams are not idle, or useless, he insists; they rest the mind.) Cowper's defence of his enjoyment of drowsing before the fire (ll. 267-307), is one of the more successful passages in The Task. Particularly interesting are the lines describing the fluttering soot on the grate, an image which is used later by Coleridge in "Frost at Midnight".

Me oft has fancy, ludicrous and wild,
Sooth'd with a waking dream of houses, tow'rs,
Trees, churches, and strange visages, express'd
In the red cinders, while with poring eye
I gaz'd, myself creating what I saw.
Nor less amus'd have I quiescent watch'd
The sooty films that play upon the bars,
Pendulous, and foreboding, in the view
Of superstition, prophesying still,
Though still deceiv'd, some stranger's near approach.
'Tis thus the understanding takes repose
In indolent vacuity of thought,
And sleeps and is refresh'd.
(IV, 286-298)

Cowper is strikingly different from Coleridge, however, in his use of this image from personal experience, and the differences may be helpful in distinguishing Cowper from the Romantics who followed. For Dryden, the fancy was the hound which ranged widely and searched out metaphors for poetry. Generally, for the Augustans, and for Cowper in this instance, fancy is "ludicrous and wild", irrational, but soothing to a "soul that does not always think" (l.285) and provides it with "waking dreams". Its only value is a passive one, as sleep which refreshes. Fancy is primarily escape, an idle activity. The image of the sooty film itself acts only as a physical reference to make concrete the idle, undirected movement of fancy. "Foreboding", however, injects that characteristic note of proximate evil, though only mildly here, referring as it does to the arrival of a stranger.

In contrast, Coleridge makes the fluttering an organic metaphor in his poem. For him the fluttering film becomes a "toy of thought", a <u>means</u> of thinking over his past life, the future life of his child near him, and a means of understanding himself, his life and the nature of things. It is not added to the poem for illustration but provides the structure of the poem.[33]

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[33]Jane Austen, who knew Cowper thoroughly, alludes to the same passage in <u>Emma</u>, but characteristically she rejects fancy as misleading, irrational and, therefore, morally dangerous. <u>Emma</u>, <u>The Novels of Jane Austen</u>, edited by R. W. Chapman, Vol. IV (Second Edition), (1926), p. 344.

As evening descends, snow falls out of doors blanketing nature warmly from the cold. In the comfortable warmth of his own hearth, Cowper considers the suffering of the deserving poor and thinks it.

> ...the part of wisdom, and no sin
> Against the law of love, to measure lots
> With less distinguish'd than ourselves; that thus
> We may with patience bear our mod'rate ills,
> And sympathize with others, suff'ring more.
> (IV, 338-340)

He presents, therefore, the picture of the waggoner fighting his way homeward through the blizzard and notes in passing that, of course, the waggoner enjoys his lot and fortunately is insensitive to pain.

> Oh happy; and, in my account, denied
> That sensibility of pain with which
> Refinement is endured, thrice happy thou!
> Thy frame, robust and hardy, feels indeed
> The piercing cold, but feels it unimpair'd.
> (IV, 357-361)

Cowper is more alert to the suffering of the horses and pleads, "Ah, treat them kindly! rude as thou appear'st" (l. 370). Cowper's concern for animals would be less disconcerting if he were more sensitive to human suffering.

The lines which follow on the deserving poor fail to penetrate beyond a rather sentimental, patronizing stance. They are praised for not seeking help from others and are encouraged by the hope that time is on their side; their numerous children when older can care for them. Cowper can be shockingly insensitive to human suffering, particularly if it may in any way be attributable to personal sin. The picture of the vicious poor, a contrasting portrait, and the attack on the liquor trade becomes strident and

shrill. The drunken father deprives his family of proper food and warm clothing by his appetite for drink, and Cowper heavily criticises the village public house and the state for irresponsibly encouraging the trade to gain the large tax income derived from it. Cowper is the fastidious gentleman who refuses to get close enough to the stench and squalour of the lives of the poor to understand or help them.[34] Whatever suffering comes to such and their families is good since it supports his limited view of divine justice.

In contrast to poverty, luxury has become the source of even greater national decline. French fashions have replaced the sturdy English utility in dress, and extravagances of fashion have not only infected the wealthy urban populace, but the lower orders in the country as well. Many urban vices, he continues, have brought their corrupting influences into the country. Rural judges now decide cases, like their urban counterparts, according to the size of the bribe. The military, once the school where noble, manly virtues were taught, has become the ruin of many a simple country recruit. There he learns

> "To swear, to game, to drink; to show at home/
> By lewdness, idleness, and sabbath breath,/
> The great proficiency he made abroad"
> (IV, 652-54)

Society is necessary, but large groups produce evil by their very nature.

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[34]Cowper distributed some money and goods supplied by Mr. Robert Smith, later Lord Carrington, through Newton. Cowper was careful to direct such aid "to none but the honest, the worthy, and consequently, I may add, to none but the truly grateful". Letters, II, pp. 30-32.

> Hence charter'd boroughs are such public plagues;
> And burghers, men immaculate perhaps
> In all their private functions, once combin'd,
> Become a loathsome body, only fit
> For dissolution, hurtful to the main.
> (IV, 671-75)

Even though the country has been infected with the vices of the town, still here in a rural environment a reformed life appears possible.

> I never fram'd a wish, or form'd a plan,
> That flatter'd me with hopes of earthly bliss,
> But there I laid the scene.
> (IV, 695-97)

The poet has always loved the natural and unspoiled; and the poets he praises and early learned to love were those "whose lyre was tun'd/ To Nature's praises": Milton, especially Paradise Lost, and Cowley. This love of nature, common to all men, was given man at his creation, a point already made in "The Garden", l. 721f. Nothing can kill this inborn love of nature, not even life in the city, as seen by its window box gardens and indoor plants.[35]

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[35] Wordsworth in a letter to John Peace (January 19, 1841) indicates two parallels if not sources for Cowper's observation. "Though I can make little use of my eyes in writing, or reading, I have lately been reading Cowper's 'Task' aloud, and in so doing was tempted to look over parallelisms, for which Mr. Southey was, in his edition, indebted to you. Knowing how comprehensive your acquaintance with poetry is, I was rather surprised that you did not notice the identity of the thought, and accompanying, illustrations of it, in a passage of Shenstone's 'Ode upon Rural Elegance', compared with one in 'The Task', [Bk. IV, 'It is a flame, etc., compared with Shenstone's 'Ode to the Duchess of Somerset', 'Her impulse nothing may restrain.'--W.W.] where Cowper speaks of the inhabitants of cities in their culture of plants and flowers, where the want of air, cleanliness, and light is so unfavourable to their growth and beauty. The germ of the main thought is to be found in Horace:

> Nempe inter varias nutritus sylva columnas,
> Laudaturque domus longus quae prospicit agros.
> Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret.
> Lib. i, epist. 10. v. 22.

(William Wordsworth, Letters, Later Years, III, pp. 1063-64.)

Cowper concludes with an apostrophe to nature and rural life,

> patronness of health, and ease,
> And contemplation, heart-consoling joys.
> (IV, 780-81)

It is necessary for some to live in cities, he concedes. But God disposes all in his good wisdom, and Cowper is pleased that Providence has assigned to him

> an unambitious mind, content
> In the low vale of life, that early felt
> A wish for ease and leisure, and ere long
> Found here that leisure and that ease I wish'd.
> (IV, 798-801)

Book V: "The Winter Morning Walk"

Still exulting in his good fortune, Cowper opens Book V with a brief but vivid description of a winter dawn. But as usual, nature is his point of departure for a discussion of other themes of greater weight. His love of nature is evident, he delights in simple pleasures, and his observation of details is acute. But nature is never an end in itself. Nature points unavoidably, for the spiritually minded, to its creator, whom man should join with nature in praising. Book V, therefore, is a collection of thoughts brought to mind while on an early morning walk in winter.

The opening hundred lines of Book V show Cowper's failure and success in describing nature. His poetic diction is at times insensitive and empty. For example, in the following lines describing the feeding of domestic fowls, notice the weakness of his

diction.

> Now from the roost, or from the neighb'ring pale,
> Where, diligent to catch the first faint gleam
> Of smiling day, they gossip'd side by side,
> Come trooping at the housewife's well-known call
> The feather'd tribes domestic. Half on wing,
> And half on foot, they brush the fleecy flood,
> Conscious, and fearful of too deep a plunge.
> The sparrows peep, and quit the shelt'ring eaves
> To seize the fair occasion. Well they eye
> The scatter'd grain; and, thievishly resolv'd
> T' escape th' impending famine, often scar'd,
> As oft return--a pert voracious kind.
> Clean riddance quickly made, one only care
> Remains to each--the search of sunny nook,
> Or shed impervious to the blast.
> (V, 58-72)

"Smiling day" is little more than poetic jargon. It fails to describe the morning though it does convey a sense of its bright cheerfulness. The "gossip" and "trooping" is somewhat better. "Feather'd tribes domestic" ineffectually generalizes and to no purpose. "Fleecy flood", conventional description of snow, confuses, and "to seize the fair occasion" is a failure in level of style. Cowper shows an insensitivity to diction frequently when he wishes to heighten the description of a simple scene to give it a kind of dignity. But in the attempt, he mixes homely realistic touches with elevated Miltonic Latinate adjectives which occasionally reduces the poetry dangerously near to the burlesque.

In contrast, he displays at other times a keen analytical eye in the descriptions of things he knows intimately and well. The lines following the quotation above, show an observation of chickens and birds in winter which only a countryman would have. Also notice the sympathetic identification with the hungry animals.

Resign'd
To sad necessity, the cock foregoes
His wonted strut; and, wading at their head
With well-consider'd steps, seems to resent
His alter'd gait and stateliness retrench'd.
How find the myriads, that in summer cheer
The hills and vallies with their ceaseless songs,
Due sustenance, or where subsist they now?
Earth yields them nought: th' imprison'd worm is safe
Beneath the frozen clod; all seeds of herbs
Lie cover'd close; and berry-bearing thorns,
That feed the thrush, (whatever some suppose)
Afford the smaller minstrels no supply.
The long protracted rigour of the year
Thins all their num'rous flocks. In chinks and holes
Ten thousand seek an unmolested end,
As instinct prompts; self-buried ere they die.
The very rooks and daws forsake the fields,
Where neither grub, nor root, nor earth-nut, now
Repays their labour more; and perch'd aloft
By the way-side, or stalking in the path,
Lean pensioners upon the trav'ler's track,
Pick up their nauseous dole, though sweet to them
Of voided pulse or half-digested grain.
(V, 72-95)

Again the verbs come to his rescue. The cock "wades" through the snow. Especially notice "thins", l. 86. The rigours of winter make the birds thin and also thins their number by death. But his nouns and adjectives are better as well, some of his best being verbal: "well-consider'd strut", the "imprison'd worm" under the snow, and the "lean pensioners upon the trav'ler's track" existing on the "nauseous dole" of "voided pulse or half-digested grain".

The ice and snow, remind him of the curious ice palace built for the Empress of Russia, which leads to a conventional statement on the transiency of the glories of this world, especially kings and their kingdoms. One play-thing of kings, more reprehensible than ice palaces, is war. The cause of war is man's proneness to evil, seen in Cain, the first murderer, and his son Tubal, first maker of iron into swords. Here, characteristically, Cowper re-interprets

pagan mythology (Vulcan) in biblical terms. Through such wanderings, Cowper arrives at what becomes a major theme. More concerned with "political" issues than the other books, Cowper recapitulates much of his discussion from "Table Talk", ll. 51-167, on kings and then proceeds to "liberty", a conventional theme in the middle of the century.

The rise of tyranny, results from man's refusal to accept the Lordship of Christ. Not in and of itself an evil, kingship becomes tyranny through the fatal and sinful desire of man to worship false gods. The king thus worshipped soon comes to believe the flattery of his subjects and becomes the tyrant. Monarchy to be valuable must always be subject to law, not to the caprice of kings or people.

> We love
> The king who loves the law, respects his bounds,
> And reigns content within them: him we serve
> Freely and with delight, who leaves us free:
> But recollecting still that he is man,
> We trust him not too far.
> (V, 331-36)

Love of the "throne" rather than the man is superstition, however.

Cowper turns to the topic which concerns him for the rest of the book: Freedom and liberty. England lacks many things in climate and in manners, but her chief grace is liberty. Men should be given radical freedom and restrained only in the interest of public order.

> 'Tis liberty alone that gives the flow'r
> Of fleeting life its lustre and perfume;
> And we are weeds without it. All constraint,
> Except what wisdom lays on evil men,
> Is evil; hurts the faculties, impedes
> Their progress in the road of sciences; blinds
> The eyesight of discov'ry; and begets,
> In those that suffer it, a sordid mind
> Bestial, a meagre intellect, unfit
> To be the tenant of man's noble form.
> (V, 446-55)

All the advantages of living in a better climate he would forego for this one virtue of England. However, if this were to be taken from him, he would choose to live abroad.

Cowper in praising liberty describes the thoughts and feelings of one in prison, (ll. 404-431), especially being cut off from social pleasure and the pain of isolation. The result is one of the more effective passages in The Task. His words are carefully and effectively chosen and his control of tone is excellent. The tolling of a bell which calls others to pleasures only indicates the passage of time to the prisoner.

> And ever, as the sullen sound is heard,
> Still to reflect, that, though a joyless note
> To him whose moments all have one dull pace,
> Ten thousand rovers in the world at large
> Account it music. (V, 405-409)

On the walls of his cell, he reads the mournful tale of a predecessor and subjoins his own. Any movement indicating life brings some relief, and he makes a friend of a spider. There is a repulsive fascination about the image which is effectively presented through describing the spider as "overgorg'd", "bloated" and a "pamper'd pest".

> To turn purveyor to an overgorg'd
> And bloated spider, till the pamper'd pest
> Is made familiar, watches his approach,
> Comes at his call, and serves him for a friend--
> (V, 421-424)

To wear out time, he counts the nail heads on his prison door, across and up and down and then aslant and alternate and adds them up each way until all sums are exactly known.

Byron provides an interesting contrast in "The Prisoner of Chillon". His story is told by the prisoner himself and gains force

from the personal narration. Carefully he fills in the atmosphere of the dungeon and the history of his family of which he is the only one remaining. In detail, he tells of the deaths in the cell with him of his two brothers. Finally released, he returns to the world so maimed he regains his freedom "with a sigh". Byron's account is more pathetic and the emotional appeals are more varied and complex. The movement of the narrative gains strength by its simplicity and candor. Cowper, through the simple directness of his description, gains force without making so open an appeal to our emotion. Through the prisoner's loneliness one feels he is seeing into Cowper's isolation later to be so powerfully expressed with the same objectivity in "The Castaway".

Cowper's praise of liberty as necessary for the flowering of genius and great art was common in the latter half of the century. In the last section of The Sublime, Professor Monk notes that Longinus attributed the decline of genius in his age to the loss of liberty;

> only in a state of freedom can great art be produced--an opinion that would naturally commend itself to the English in an age when they complacently contrasted their own constitutional monarchy with the despotism that prevailed on the Continent, and where they prided themselves on the prevalence of individual liberty in the body politic." 36

Cowper shared in this enthusiasm for liberty hailed by Thomson as "Heaven's next best gift, / To that of life and an immortal soul". 37

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36 Samuel Monk, The Sublime: a Study of Critical Theories in the XVIII-Century England (1935), p. 26.

37 "Liberty", Part V, "The Prospect", ll. 124-125.

Cowper follows Thomson as well in attacking wide-spread corruption in public office, party factions, and the general loss of moral vigour shown in luxury and a yielding to the effeminate and decadent manners of the French. Although Thomson warns against these evils, he considers such warnings "superfluous" to Britons since they are good-natured, concerned for "honest truth" (erring sometimes on the side of bluntness), indignant and scornful of baseness, and above all generous and patriotic. Thomson's "Liberty" concludes with a vision of the glorious future of England: Italy and France have achieved greatness in the arts and sciences under the Medici and Louis XIV. If they, under the rule of tyrants have found greatness, the spirit of the Renaissance still moving northward, blessed by liberty in Britain, will do much more where subjects live in freedom under a benevolent and gracious King George. Corruption will disappear and a new age of art, science and commerce will flower. Throughout "Liberty" a swelling optimism for the future mounts almost to ecstasy.

For all Cowper's love and praise of liberty, such optimism as Thomson's is impossible for him. According to Evangelical and orthodox Christian theology, this world is only temporary, a place where the Elect are tested and strengthened, but a place also where corruption and evil will increase until God's judging fire shall purge it and the New Jerusalem, created by God not man, will descend from the heavens. Earth, for the Evangelical Christian, is no place for optimism. Political freedom, though a great good, is a dependent and secondary value. The one great tyrant is sin; as

long as one is in bondage to sin, he is never truly free. Worthy of greater praise, therefore, is that liberty which is the gift of grace, purchased not by the death of patriots but by the blood of Christ. Through grace--transmitted by the power of Scripture--man can be free no matter how physically restricted he may be. Man's body itself is a prison and serves the triple purpose of chains, stripes, and dungeons; and from this bondage reason is incapable of freeing man. Philosophy has often urged man to live the good life, to follow virtue, but it lacks the power to free him. Grace alone may effectually call man to righteous living.

> Spend all the pow'rs
> Of rant and rhapsody in virtue's praise:
> Be most sublimely good, verbosely grand,
> And with poetic trappings grace thy prose,
> Till it out-mantle all the pride of verse.--
> Ah, tinkling cymbal, and high sounding brass,
> Smitten in vain! such music cannot charm
> Th' eclipse that intercepts truth's heav'nly beam,
> And chills and darkens a wide-wand'ring soul.
> The STILL SMALL VOICE is wanted.
> (V, 676-85)

Only "grace makes the slave a freeman" (V, 688).

Patriots who died to free their country or to defend its freedom have been amply praised by monuments and poetry. Little noticed are those martyrs of the faith who have shed their blood

> In confirmation of the noblest claim--
> Our claim to feed upon immortal truth,
> To walk with God, to be divinely free.
> \+ + + +
> They liv'd unknown
> Till persecution dragg'd them into flame,
> And chas'd them up to heav'n.
> (V, 720-22, 724-26)

Only those whom Truth has freed are free; "and all are slaves

beside" (V, 734). Once so freed, the freeman unavoidably and irresistably turns to nature in which he sees his creator and saviour.

Cowper consistently maintains the primacy of grace over nature. "Acquaint thyself with God, if thou would'st taste/ His works" (V, 779-80).

> Admitted once to his embrace,
> Thou shalt perceive that thou wast blind before:
> Thine eye shall be instructed; and thine heart,
> Made pure, shall relish, with divine delight
> Till then unfelt, what hands divine have wrought.
> (V, 780-84)

Others view and admire the landscape but see no more. "The landscape has his praise,/ But not its author" (V, 792-93). Once having asserted the proper priority, Cowper develops the joy which one derives from using nature for its proper end.

> Not for its own sake merely, but for his
> Much more who fashion'd it, he gives it praise.
> (V, 800-801)

This statement more than any other indicates the reason for Cowper's praise of nature in The Task.

> The soul that sees him, or receives sublim'd
> New faculties, or learns at least t'employ
> More worthily the pow'rs she own'd before;
> Discerns in all things, what, with stupid gaze
> Of ignorance, till then she overlook'd--
> A ray of heav'nly light, gilding all forms
> Terrestial in the vast and the minute;
> The unambiguous footsteps of the God
> Who gives its lustre to an insect's wing,
> And wheels his throne upon the rolling worlds.
> (V, 805-14)

Significantly, the long discourse by the newly freed man is described as a "reading" of nature. Newton had described nature as the book wherein a man with the "lamp of truth" reads of God's power and infinite goodness. Without that lamp, however, nature only leads

the beholder astray into idolatry, as the Greeks and Romans had wandered, finding false deities everywhere. Cowper concludes the book with an address to God which essentially summarizes what he has said up to this point. In nature

> A voice is heard that mortal ears hear not
> Till thou has touch'd them; 'tis the voice of song--
> A loud hosanna sent from all thy works;
> Which he that hears it with a shout repeats,
> And adds his rapture to the gen'ral praise.
> In that blest moment Nature, throwing wide
> Her veil opaque, discloses with a smile
> The author of her beauties, who, retir'd
> Behind his own creation, works unseen
> By the impure, and hears his power denied.
> (V, 886-95)

Cowper in his praise of nature wishes but to echo nature's praise of her creator. He makes manifest what is already there for those who can not see and hear. Although one is surprised at just how few lines in The Task are directly concerned with a description of nature, it should be remembered that nature is always a point of departure, not an end for Cowper. His pleasure in nature is genuine, but it is usually a pleasure which is enhanced by pointing beyond the natural to the supernatural.

Book VI: "The Winter Walk at Noon"

Cowper opens the concluding book with a return to a brief discussion of his pleasure derived from sounds when heard in natural surroundings. Associations which are recalled by hearing a church bell hold his attention. He remembers his childhood and his father, the minister of the church whose bells supply the connection. From this association he is reminded of how children and youth fail to be

grateful to their parents until it is too late. Cowper works from delight in concrete objects for their own sake, through associations aroused by them, to moral digressions. This basic associational method of The Task allows an integrity to the objects in nature, yet leaves the poet free to move from and through them to his thoughts of God and moral concerns.

Returning to the concrete again Cowper describes his winter walk at noon for approximately thirty lines, essentially a re-covering or repetition of the earlier walk depicted in "The Sofa". The bright whiteness of the fields contrast sharply with the deep clear sky. Walking in the colonnade of trees described in "The Sofa", he now finds stillness, except for the tinkling sound of icedrops shaken from the boughs overhead by a lonely redbreast.

> Stillness, accompanied with sounds so soft,
> Charms more than silence.
> (VI, 83-84)

He turns immediately to meditations on the value of thoughts in natural surroundings which, though they do not necessarily add to one's knowledge, teach one wisdom. He makes the conventional distinction between knowledge and wisdom in moral terms.

> Knowledge is proud that he has learn'd so much;
> Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.
> (VI, 96-97)

Knowledge, therefore, is capable of moral deception. Anticipating Wordsworth, he finds in nature a more effective teacher of moral good than books.

> But trees, and rivulets whose rapid course
> Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,
> And sheep-walks populous with bleating lambs,
> And lanes in which the primrose ere her time

Peeps through the moss that clothes the hawthorn root,
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,
Not shy, as in the world, and to be won
By slow solicitation, seize at once
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.
(VI, 109-117)

One reason why men fail to see the wonder of nature is their acceptance of the Deistic view that God wound up the world at the beginning and left it to run itself without his personal and continuous intervention. Not so, Cowper insists.

All we behold is miracle; but, seen
So duly, all is miracle in vain.[38]
(VI, 132-33)

To help the reader see the glories of nature, he catalogues the flowers. Though this miraculous beauty is transient, it is yearly reborn, and teaches man heavenly truth. The field of snow

Shall be dismantled of its fleecy load,
And flush into variety again.
From dearth to plenty, and from death to life,
Is Nature's progress when she lectures man
In heav'nly truth; evincing, as she makes
The grand transition, that there lives and works
A soul in all things, and that soul is God.
(VI, 179-85)

Underlying all is God's ceaseless care and concern. Running dangerously near to pantheism, he insists that God is immanent in nature.

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[38]Cf. Edward Young, "Night Thoughts," IV, 703-705:
Read Nature; Nature is a friend to truth;
Nature is Christian; preaches to mankind;
And bids dead matter aid us in our creed.
Cf. also, IX, 843-44; IX, 1005; IX, 1267. Cf. with Task, VI, 118-125; 132-33. (Joseph Warren Beach, The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry, 1936, p. 43.)

> The Lord of all, himself through all diffus'd,
> Sustains, and is the life of all that lives.
> Nature is but a name for an effect,
> Whose cause is God.
> (VI, 221-24)

This even the pagans felt, though they did not understand, when they saw gods under the various attributes of nature and named them Pomona, Pales, Pan.

> And Flora, and Vertumnus; peopling earth
> With tutelary goddesses and gods
> That were not; and commending, as they would,
> To each some province, garden, field, or grove.
> But all are under one.
> (VI, 233-38)

One spirit, Christ the creator, is lord of nature and in his lordship brings joy in every season. So winter, the least attractive season, can please. If man had not sinned, however, winter would be unknown and eternal spring would have continued.

Herein is at least one reason why Cowper chose to write of winter. The least attractive of seasons, the most inclement, has its joys, pleasures unsullied by the sins of urban society. If winter, an archetype of life in a fallen world, has joys, how glorious will be those of a redeemed and transformed world, which he depicts at the conclusion of the book. So too the pleasures of the city fade into insignificant trivia and no longer concern him.

Winter prospects, occur frequently in eighteenth-century poetry. As Professor Sutherland has pointed out, "Some of the most delightful descriptive passages in eighteenth-century poetry are concerned with the winter landscape, when frost and snow have combined to give the trees and the flowers an odd appearance of artificiality."[39]

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[39]Sutherland, Preface to Eighteenth-Century Poetry (1948), pp. 114-115

Ambrose Phillips and Thomson both used winter landscapes, and Cowper's is a more gentle version of Thomson's.

His discussion of town pursuits (ll. 262-294), however, takes on a shrillness which amounts nearly to hysteria. Usually when Cowper discusses the town, his complaint is too extreme. Behind it all appears a fear of the city and its life which attracts him more than he is willing to admit. During his years in Olney, he eagerly read the newspapers and magazines and carefully followed the rise and fall of former friends. He longs to take part, to be a part of the life and activities of the town, yet he fears to participate. This may also be the reason for the note of self-pity which creeps into such passages as "I was a stricken deer". Cowper himself said he liked to watch the town through the peep-holes of retreat. He is eager for vicarious enjoyment but terribly afraid of entering actively into contemporary life.

Certainly he was shy by nature and his refusal to stand his examination before the House of Lords, his attempts at suicide and subsequent mental collapse must have quickly become a topic for conversation at least among the circle of his London friends. It would be difficult enough for him to return to London a year or two later to face inquiring glances. He knew the attitude of his friends to mental illness; he had gone with them when at Westminster to Bethlehem Hospital for amusement.[40] His retirement, therefore, was

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[40] Letters, II, p. 229.

a more comfortable solution to his personal problems than a return to London would have been. The shrillness of his condemnation, therefore, may not be so much an expression of his Evangelicalism as the frustration of a perhaps unacknowledged desire for a fuller life than provincial Olney could provide.

Whatever the season, in nature he finds the animals filled with joy. The hare and birds enjoy life as God intended; he notices particularly the squirrel, who

> sees me, and at once, swift as a bird,
> Ascends the neighb'ring beach; there whisks his brush,
> And perks his ears, and stamps and cries aloud,
> With all the prettiness of feign'd alarm,
> And anger insignificantly fierce.
> (VI, 316-320)

Cowper is primarily effective in his brief descriptions of animals, and this is one of his best. The monosyllabic verbs dramatically present the squirrel whose actions show his joy in life as God's creature. By association Cowper moves from this brief depiction of the concrete to an application of a moral principle. A man who finds no pleasure in watching animals is morally insensitive and spiritually dead.

In all of his poetry Cowper consistently shows an unusual interest in animals and their activities. He kept hares and a dog and a number of his shorter poems are concerned with them. Animals, according to Cowper, have rights which were given them at Creation and are the concern of the Creator. Cowper follows the traditional distinction drawn between man and animals but adds to it the support of the Bible.

Man is distinguished from animals by his reason and his capacity for grace. Given a higher position in the chain of being, he is responsible to God for the care and protection of the animals who are dependent upon him. They in turn serve man, a service from which man may learn attachment, fidelity and gratitude more easily than from his fellow man. From Adam's sin, not only man but all of nature fell. Man then compounds the harm he has brought to animals by his mistreatment of them. God, whose eye sees the sparrow's fall (Matthew x. 29), though in his mercy slow to punish, will see that justice is done. To illustrate, Cowper inserts the most unpleasant story in The Task, the horrible tale of Misagathus and Evander in which a horse cruelly treated by his rider pitches him off a cliff to his death.

> So God wrought double justice; made the fool
> The victim of his own tremendous choice,
> And taught a brute the way to safe revenge.
> (VI, 557-559)

Cowper does distinguish between unnecessary cruelty to animals and man's primary right to survival. Only in self-defence, however, should men kill poisonous snakes, for example, and earlier he had noted that man is "carnivorous through sin" (VI, 457).

Cowper justifies his praise of animals by insisting that men have frequently been more extravagant in their praise of man. By way of example he refers to the Handel commemoration recital of The Messiah in Westminster Abbey which so offended him,[41] and the

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[41] Letters, II, p. 270.

praise of Garrick who had built his fame by praising Shakespeare. These men were worthy of praise, but many other men, especially politicians, are not. In contrast, Cowper hopes to stand "between an animal and woe, / And teach one tyrant pity for his drudge" (VI, 727-728).

Though animals shared in the effects of the Fall, they are blameless and, therefore, not in need of salvation. They humbly praise their Creator and await the redemption of all things which is promised with the return of the Lord of nature to earth. Appealing to Romans viii. 21-23, in which St. Paul predicts an end to nature's groans when man is redeemed and Paradise is regained, Cowper moves to his concluding doxological proclamation of the Second Coming.

> For He, whose car the winds are, and the clouds
> The dust that waits upon his sultry march,
> When sin hath mov'd him, and his wrath is hot,
> Shall visit earth in mercy; shall descend,
> Propitious, in his chariot pav'd with love;
> And what his storms have blasted and defac'd
> For man's revolt shall with a smile repair.
> (VI, 740-746)

Cowper compares himself with the biblical prophets and acknowledges his lack of divine inspiration. But when moved by such a theme, he cannot resist attempting the portrayal of the new Paradise. This he does through a rather free paraphrase of biblical passages drawn largely from the Apocalypse, though there are echoes as well of Milton, especially Paradise Lost, Book XII. His "prophecy" ends with the biblical prayer of the Revelation, "Even so, come quickly Lord Jesus".

Perhaps the most striking expression of Evangelicalism in

The Task is Cowper's stress in both "The Time-Piece" and "The Winter Walk at Noon" (ll. 729-746; ll. 855-905) on the Second Coming of Christ. We have already seen in Book II how he interpreted the "signs of the times" as indicating that the Day of Judgment was near. Here again he uses the prophecy of Jesus (Matthew xxiv. 3-24) as the basis for his discussion and relates it to complementary passages from the Revelation. On such a theme he appeals directly to biblical authority and does not go far beyond a fairly literal application of the texts in question both in content and language. Reading events in society and nature in the light of biblical prophecy, he finds all the evidence pointing to the imminent return of Christ.

> Thy prophets speak of such; and, noting down
> The features of the last degen'rate times,
> Exhibit ev'ry lineament of these.
> (VI, 899-901)

Such an understanding of time and history is largely responsible for the sombre pessimism of his outlook which is in such striking contrast to his contemporaries' belief in progress. If the world is soon to pass away, the most crucial question to be raised is how best to employ the time which remains. With an eye to such a future event, Cowper must stress the need for repentance both private and public. And the very optimism of his times makes his cry all the more shrill. Since all things made by man are transient and will soon be destroyed, retirement into nature, God's handiwork which will be transformed, is of even greater value and the most suitable place to await the End, either cosmic or personal,

> ...a safe retreat
> Beneath the turf that I have often trod.
> (VI, 1005-1005)

Without wishing to over-stress the point, it may be maintained that such a view of the shortness of time is fundamental to many of Cowper's attitudes in The Task. Significantly he placed this discussion of the Second Coming almost at the end of the last book. Here it receives a maximum amount of stress, and is followed by his final defence of his "idle life".[42]

Most of his points have been made before. He adds the suggestion, however, that prayer and contemplation, and the lives of the righteous, withhold God's hand of judgment from destroying the world. Earlier he had suggested the presence of a few righteous men in London kept back God's hand from destroying this modern Sodom ("The Garden", ll. 843-848). Now he includes himself and the prayers of his friends in Olney, that little Protestant nunnery, in this redemptive task. No greater claim to social utility could be made, given his premises.

> So life glides smoothly and by stealth away,
> More golden than that age of fabled gold
> Renown'd in ancient song.[43] (VI, 995-997)

The final twenty lines need special attention for what they reveal about his original plan or intention and its final develop-

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[42]Cf. Book V, ll. 529-530:

> All has its date below; the fatal hour
> Was register'd in heav'n ere time began.

See also Book, V, ll. 559-565.

[43]Huang, p. 86, calls this final section of The Task, "the final fulfilment of the descriptive art of an Evangelical poet of nature."

ment.

> It shall not grieve me, then, that once, when call'd
> To dress a Sofa with the flow'rs of verse,
> I play'd awhile, obedient to the fair,
> With that light task; but soon, to please her more,
> Whom flow'rs alone I knew would little please,
> Let fall th'unfinish'd wreath, and rov'd for fruit;
> Rov'd far, and gather'd much: some harsh, 'tis true,
> Pick'd from the thorns and briers of reproof,
> But wholesome, well-digested; grateful some
> To palates that can taste immortal truth;
> Insipid else, and sure to be despis'd.
> But all is in his hand whose praise I seek.
> In vain the poet sings, and the world hears,
> If he regard not, though divine the theme.
> 'Tis not in artful measures, in the chime
> And idle tinkling of a minstrel's lyre,
> To charm his ear, whose eye is on the heart;
> Whose frown can disappoint the proudest strain,
> Whose approbation--prosper even mine.
> (VI, 1006-24)

Cowper is more interested in gathering "fruit" than "flowers". The Task has its flowers, but his intention is not different from that of the moral satires of 1782. He has written in blank verse with the same two-fold intent to delight his readers that they may hear his reproof and instruction. He is still the prophet, though less rigid in his stance than before, and draws on Augustan and mid-century conventions more freely. His more full use of nature may have come from his success in writing "Retirement", the most fluent of the satires. His small scenes, frequently drawn from nature, are fewer than one could wish, however, and he moves with alacrity to the moral application or association.

For the structure of The Task, Cowper has abandoned the traditional order based on reason or logic in favour of the structure of association or reverie. Cowper's Evangelical limiting of the power and adequacy of reason must have made attractive Shaftesbury's

sentimentalism which valued spontaneous feelings and was suspicious of reason. The doctrine of association itself is derived from Hobbes and Locke and developed during the century by Addison, Hartley, Alison and others. According to its doctrines, the moral sense and high faculties were based upon primary experiences with the physical world. Truth, as a result, becomes highly personal and subjective.

Cowper follows an associational structure throughout The Task. From experiences with nature, the mind is led by association to thoughts of higher, more sublime things. Nature, therefore, becomes the ideal place for meditation and the development of one's moral capacities without morbid thoughts being aroused inevitably as they would be in the town. And Cowper's truth is, even by his own statement, a highly personal and subjective view. His religious faith is experimental and proved not by logic or reason but by convincing the heart.

Yvor Winters, in an excellent essay on Charles Churchill, observes that "Milton provides a kind of link between the ornate - pietistic tradition of the seventeenth century and the Ornate - sentimental and associative tradition of the eighteenth."[44] Winters properly links the ornate style to that of Milton and the heroic, and the directly didactic or satiric to the plain style.[45]

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[44]Ivor Winters, "The Poetry of Charles Churchill", Poetry. vol. 98 (1961), p. 46.

[45]Ibid., p. 48.

In The Task, however, Cowper attempts to combine the two styles in a single poem. He frequently succeeds with the plain style in his descriptions of primary experiences with nature, but when he attempts the more ornate to grace a lofty theme, he almost always fails. The reason for his failure, however, is to some extent linked to the literary conventions of the century.

The Pastoralism of The Task

By the time Cowper came to write The Task, the pastoralism of the earlier years of the century was no longer fashionable. The convention of peopling nature with gods and goddesses, the "affectation of Arcadian unreality", and the "quasi-dramactic presentation of unnatural shepherds and other countrymen" had given way to the greater realism of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village".[46] Partially responsible for this change had been the modification of the pastoral by Thomson. Following the discovery of the Georgic by John Philips in his "The Splendid Shilling" (1705) and "Cyder" (1708), Thomson adopts Philips' Miltonic blank verse for his measure and turns Virgil into a true-born Englishman. Thomson abandons the idyllic nature of the pastorals for a more realistic portrayal and introduces moral and philosophic ideas. The impact of the New Science contributes to his more realistic descriptions of nature and the effect of the changing seasons upon various objects.[47] With the Georgic descriptions of rural occupations,

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[46] Durling, p. x.

[47] A. D. McKillops, Background of Thomson's Seasons (1942)
M. H. Nicolson, Newton Demands the Muse (1946).

Thomson combines views of the landscape in the manner of the local poems following Dyer. According to Durling, "The essential motifs of the Georgics reappear in The Seasons: the glorification of labour and the life of the husbandman through their associations with patriotism, morality, religion, and the beauties of nature".[48]

Cowper continues many elements of Virgil's Georgics and Thomson's Seasons in The Task.[49] His self-conscious attempt at a Virgilian Georgic in "The Garden", on the cultivation of the cucumber and the preparation of the hot frame, however, is disruptive and ineffective as poetry. If one contrasts The Task with The Seasons, one of the most obvious differences is the loss revealed in Cowper of any feeling for the Georgic. Thomson's descriptions of rural occupations and pursuits--sheep-dipping and fishing--are among his finest passages, and Cowper has nothing to compare with them. He passes quickly from the feeding of animals in winter to larger concerns. He can never rest with any ease in description which gives pleasure for its own sake. In Thomson the moralizing reflections and philosophic speculations tend to be lifeless and conventional, and he spends comparatively few lines on them; almost the complete reverse is true of Cowper. Natural scenery, though delightful to him, is always used to hustle us on to the religious and moral application or association.

Cowper is more English in his scenery than is Thomson, and he criticizes him for his scenery which is unfamiliar to the reader.[50]

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[48]Durling, p. 46.

[49]See Huang, p. 111; Durling; and Maine Loretto Lilly, The Georgic: A Contribution to the Study of the Virgilian Type of Didactic Poetry (1919.

[50]Letters. III. pp. 284-285. See also E.M. Foster, "William Cowper, An Englishman", Spectator, CXL VIII (1932) p. 71.

Unlike Thomson, Cowper identifies his prospects both geographically and personally. The river is the Ouse, the town Olney, and the particular views though generalized in their moral application are consistently particular. The colonnade of trees and the wilderness with "well-roll'd walks" are the Throckmortons', and Cowper includes a footnote to mkae clear whose they are. With Thomson the landscape is not always English but may be set in the Alps or other exotic places of which he has read. Wild, rugged and romantic, some of his landscapes are similar to a Salvatore Rosa painting. He also draws sharp contrasts between the rugged and wild and the more pastoral landscape of the English countryside. Although Cowper was reading voyages while writing The Task, he does not draw on them for landscapes, though they do provide material for moral digressions.

His landscapes are further particularized by the highly subjective way in which he presents them. Little of Thomson's private life is conveyed through The Seasons, though his temper is. In contrast, it is Cowper's Olney we see in The Task, and even more powerfully, it is Cowper himself who becomes the subject matter and the scenery is used to reflect him and his views.

His desire for verifiable scenery is echoed a number of times in The Task, especially when he wishes to reject false Arcadianism.[51] With Goldsmith, he attacks the way "profusion" and "luxury" have "ting'd the country" (IV, 553), but the pastoral picture of life in nature was a

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[51]Especially Task, IV, l. 513f.

> Vain wish! those days were never: airy dreams
> Sat for the picture; and the poet's hand,
> Imparting substance to an empty shade,
> Impos'd a gay delirium for a truth.
> (IV, 525-528)

Though such Arcadias never existed, Cowper respects the desire for innocence and simplicity which such pastoralism reveals.

> I still must envy them an age
> That favour'd such a dream; in days like these
> Impossible, when virtue is so scarce,
> That to suppose a scene where she presides,
> Is tramontane, and stumbles all belief.
> (IV, 529-533)

The only true Arcadia was Eden, and even in that paradise man speedily found the way to sin.

Though Cowper shares with Goldsmith a nostalgia for a simpler way of life and insists on a more realistic description of nature, at least part of his reason for this divergence from the mid-century norm is the biblical origin of his attitude toward nature. Both Thomson and Young reflect the impact of the New Science on poetry of the century. Thomson's imagination was stimulated by the new ways of seeing nature, and he is eager to explore and to discuss the origin of creation in mechanical terms. Edward Young, though he shares Cowper's moral and religious enthusiasm to some extent, was willing to accept a more Deistic view of nature, which Cowper rejects For Cowper, there is only one cosmology, and that is found in Genesis. There is only one true and adequate explanation of creation and the continued existence of the world, and that explanation is given by revelation.

Underlying much of the biblical pastoralism is a nostalgia for Eden. The ideal place for man's innocence created by the

Father was a garden. And though all men now live "east of Eden", and the Garden is beyond man's returning, the ache and longing for it continues to be expressed. If Paradise was a garden, then the nearest man can get to his early innocence is in nature.

Cowper was an orthodox son of the Reformation in his view of nature. According to the Reformed faith, nature was always creation. God the Father through the Son had brought the world into existence and continued to maintain it in existence with unfailing care and concern. In sharp contrast, the Deists had asserted an essentially impersonal relationship between God and his world and denied God's concern with its moment by moment continuation. Nature as creation, for the Evangelical, was always the context of man's existence. Nature by the will of God was subservient to and to be governed by man, and man was responsible to God for nature as a good husbandman and steward. A biblical example occurs in Genesis ii. 19-20 in which a touchingly simple Adam reviews the animals of creation and assigns them names as they file past to do him obeisance. But this special relationship between man and nature was marred and defaced by man's sin. The imago Dei, as Genesis describes man, was so obliterated that man unenlightened is no longer capable of seeing the reflection of God in man or in nature. In contrast, the Deist essentially denied the Fall and its disastrous effect upon man and his reason. With a right use of reason, man can see and adequately understand God, especially, according to the Deists, by examining nature and its laws. For Cowper and the Evangelicals, reason after the Fall was

inadequate by itself. Only through revelation, by God revealing himself in Jesus Christ as recorded in the Bible, can fallen man find again his creator.[52] As Cowper wrote to Newton, God never reveals through nature what he has not already made plain in the Scripture:

> ...that what the God of the Scriptures has seen fit to conceal, he will not as the God of Nature publish. He is one and the same in both capacities, and consistent with himself; and His purpose, if He designs a secret, impenetrable, in whatever way we attempt to open it. [53]

Once enlightened, however, man can see God everywhere and will delight to see the adoration and praise expressed continuously by nature, though imperfectly, to her creator. But nature is never revelation. Natural religion (reason working with the given--man's mind and heart and the scenery--necessarily finds God) is radically rejected. The Bible as the bearer of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was primary, therefore, to Cowper and the Evangelicals.

Newton had discussed the problem at length while still at Olney. In "A Plan of a Compendious Christian Library", he had said there were only four books necessary to be known. They are the Bible, the textbook upon which all true knowledge is based, and three further books which are the best commentaries on the Bible: (1) the Book of Creation, (2) the Book of Providence, or history, and (3) the Book of the Human Heart, or of human nature. Of particular interest is his instructions for the right use of the Book of

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[52] William Law, The Case of Reason or Natural Religion fairly stated (1731).

[53] Letters, II, p. 77.

Creation. Cowper, both in his poetry and in his letters, frequently echoes the same theme explicitly and implicitly.

> God is revealed in the least, as well as in the greatest of his works. The sun and the glow-worm, the fabric of the universe, and each single blade of grass, are equally the effects of divine power. The lines of this book, though very beautiful and expressive in themselves, are not immediately legible by fallen man. The works of creation may be compared to a fair character in cypher, of which the Bible is the key: and without this key they cannot be understood.

Here Newton is not merely following Derham and the physico-theology by saying that God can be seen in nature. Only through revelation, the Bible, can one understand or truly see that spiritual truth which is there to be seen. Newton continues:

> They who know God in his word, may find both pleasure and profit tracing his wisdom in his works, if their inquiries are kept within due bounds, and in proper subservience to things of greater importance ....But the book of creation is designed for the instruction of all believers. If they are not qualified to be astronomers or anatomists, yet, from a view of the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars, which he hath created, they learn to conceive of his condescension, power, and faithfulness. Though they are unacquainted with the theory of light and colours, they can see in the rainbow a token of God's covenant-love. Perhaps they have no idea of the magnitude or distance of the sun; but it reminds them of Jesus the Sun of righteousness, the source of light and life to their souls. The Lord has established a wonderful analogy between the natural and the spiritual world. This is a secret known only to them that fear him; but they contemplate it with pleasure; and almost every object they see, when they are in a right frame of mind, either leads their thoughts to Jesus, or tends to illustrate some spiritual truth or promise. This is the best method of studying the book of Nature, and for this purpose it is always open and plain to those who love the Bible, so that he who runs may read. 54

54John Newton, "A Plan of a Compendius [sic] Christian Library," The Works of the Rev. John Newton (1837), Vol. I, pp. 69-71. (Forty-One Letters on Religious Subjects, 1774). Italics added.

The idea that every natural object is in some way a concrete showing forth of God is not especially new but is inherited from the Middle Ages and continues certainly through the poetry of Herbert and Vaughan. But Newton is not merely repeating that view with overtones of the New Science. Central to his statement is the inability of man without Revelation (biblical and personal) to gain profit from "tracing his wisdom in his works". The more traditional position had seen human reason as the hand-maid of grace, but Cowper and Newton agree with William Law that reason is inadequate as an approach to grace, though it may help one talk about it after God has revealed himself to man in the reading of the Bible and personal religious experience. Nature is not emblematic except to the "few" to whom God chooses to reveal himself.

Two aspects of Newton's statement, therefore, need careful examination. First, this discovery of God's attributes in the natural world is open only to the believer, "to them that fear him". Secondly, what he receives from nature is a reminder of biblical events and doctrines. Only those who "know God in his word" are reminded by the rainbow, for example, of "God's covenant love" promised to Noah following the Flood. What is seen in nature by the enlightened mind is a reminder and confirmation of Evangelical doctrine. To understand nature, therefore, one must know the Bible. The Deist, in contrast, saw in nature God's universally acknowledged attributes; the Evangelical found reminders of biblical revelation. At work here is the same associational

process which Cowper uses throughout The Task.

The Task in these terms is a descriptive, didactic pastoral poem in which Cowper attempts to show to fallen man this "secret anology" between the natural and the spiritual world which he is unable to perceive. Cowper leads him through delight in natural beauty to thoughts of spiritual truth which is biblically revealed. The substance of the poem, therefore, is biblical, and he tries to make the style comparable to the "plain and simple sublimity of scriptural language".

The Biblical Style of The Task

The style as well as the content of The Task, Cowper insisted, was biblical. In describing the poem to Newton, he rather boldly asserted,

> ...I have admitted into my description no images but what are scriptural, and have aimed as exactly as I could at the plain and simple sublimity of the Scripture language.... 55

Two aspects of the quotation require explication in the light of Cowper's practice in the poem. First, for Cowper, "Scriptural" images does not limit him to only those images actually found in the Bible. He disliked the slavish kind of imitation of the standard authors or the pillaging of their poetry for lines and figures of speech to pad out one's own.[56]

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[55] Letters, II, p. 272.

[56] Letters, II, p. 386.

The Bible, however, is not Homer's Iliad. Cowper does borrow heavily from the Bible for illustrations and allusions. When he wishes to be prophetic, he does use loose paraphrases of biblical passages, and he is careful to limit himself to biblical terms in discussing theological concepts.

> I acknowledge that grace, in my use of the word, does not often occur in poetry. So neither does the subject which I handle. Every subject has its own terms, and religious ones take theirs with most propriety from the Scripture: then I take the word grace [57]

Some of the language and figures of speech in The Task, therefore, are scriptural in this most literal sense.

As applied to the whole poem, however, a wider understanding of Cowper's phrase is necessary. He depicts current events, he calls the reader's attention to the beauties of nature, and he draws on his reading of secular literature for allusions. Although these sources are not biblical, Cowper's use of them is.

Cowper owes much of his success to his concern with "the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked and another neglected," as Dr. Johnson described it in Rasselas.[58] These continuously recall our wandering attention during the sermons with brief, vivid sketches in words the way the details of a Breughel painting do. Goldwin Smith quite accurately recalls Homer in relation to Cowper's practice. "The minutely faithful description of the man carving the load of hay out of the stack,

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[57] Letters, II, p. 256.

[58] Samuel Johnson, Rasselas, Book X; quoted by Sutherland, p. 32.

and again those of the gambolling dog, and the woodman's smoking his pipe with the stream of smoke trailing behind him, remind us of the touches of minute fidelity in Homer."[59]

Others have noted Cowper's fidelity to facts, but they have failed to appreciate his method of composition. Fausset, for example, complains that Cowper "never strove to discipline ideas to facts or to interpret facts ideally, but only to invest them with sentiment or reflect upon them".[60] In brief and detailed sketches, Cowper does show an interest in the scene almost for its own sake. He attempts to make the scene sit for him while he paints it. Once the incident or scene is presented, he moves by association to moral reflections rather than through the object described to an understanding of divine truth. Nature may <u>remind</u> the observer of the majesty of God, but it does not <u>reveal</u> him. From a description of ice formations, in "The Winter Morning Walk", ll. 96-125, he moves to a contrasting description of the works of man, the palace of ice built for the Empress of Russia (ll. 126-167), and that inevitably leads to a moralizing comment on the transiency and the vanity of this world. At no time does an observation of an object in or scene of nature directly provide an insight into or a knowledge of God and his ways. Nature is God's creation, but it is the context of revelation only fully and adequately presented in

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[59]Goldwin Smith, <u>Cowper</u>, p. 71.

[60]Hugh I'Anson Fausset, <u>William Cowper</u> (1928), p. 235.

Holy Scripture.

Fausset's explanation is that his similes "were taken directly from his own experience, and because that experience was restricted he disdained nothing as being too lowly to be interesting."[61] But Cowper was not so unconscious of his craft; writing to Unwin, he states, "My descriptions are all from nature: not one of them second-handed. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience: not one of them borrowed from books, or in the least degree conjectural."[62] But Fausset is right in the way Cowper uses concrete facts, though he assumes the only acceptable way to use facts is to "idealize" them.

Here is the clue to Cowper's meaning. As the biblical writers strove to speak plain truths to simple men, so Cowper uses the materials open and familiar to all in order to illustrate and to win their assent to what may be strange and repugnant truth, a proceedure he may have learned from James Hervey.[63]

Secondly, Cowper claims to have aimed at "the plain and simple sublimity of the Scripture language". In his explication of the sacred poetry of the Hebrews, Lowth had pointed out that their use of the plain and simple things, instead of violating propriety and descending into the vulgar, had rather the opposite effect.

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[61] Ibid., p. 158.

[62] Letters, II, p. 252.

[63] Huang, pp. 24-25. See also J.E.V. Croft, Eighteenth-Century Literature: An Oxford Miscellany (1909), pp. 146-48.

> We are not to wonder that those objects which were most familiar to their senses afforded the principal ornaments of their poetry; especially since they furnished so various and so elegant an assortment of materials, that not only the beautiful, but the grand and magnificent, might be collected from them. If any person of more nicety than judgment should esteem some of these rustic images grovelling and vulgar, it may be of some use to him to be informed, that such an effect can only result from the ignorance of the critic, who, through the medium of his scanty information and peculiar prejudices, presumes to estimate matters of the most remote antiquity; it cannot reasonably be attributed as an error to the sacred poets, who not only give to those ideas all their natural force and dignity, but frequently, by the vivacity and boldness of the figure, exhibit them with additional vigour, ornament, and beauty. 64

The quality most often praised in the biblical writers by Lowth and others in the middle and late eighteenth century was their sublimity. Through the use of the familiar, their poetry was able to move man beyond reason to an ecstatic or mystical relationship with God.

Cowper stresses at several points in The Task the need for plainness and simplicity in dealing with sacred things. In "The Time-Piece", the true preacher is described as being "in language plain" (l. 400). In contrast, the false priest parades his knowledge of pagan philosophers and shows his indifference to Holy Scripture. In his own practice, Cowper is generally chaste in his choice of diction and carefully avoids rhetorical flights and elaborate figures of speech.

Aside from the pervasive influence of the Bible on his style, Cowper also allowed his religious views to affect decisions in his

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64 Robert Lowth, Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews (1847) pp. 80-81. Original Latin text, 1753; first English translation by G. Gregory, 1787.

writing. His strict following of the Bible, for example, caused him to exclude rigorously the usual pagan deities conventionally found in the pastoral. As he condemned the false clergy for their use of pagan philosophy, but admitted its value if baptized, so poets may use classical deities if they are clearly labelled as non-existent.[65] At other places in the poem they are used to show how man when he rejects God creates gods of his own to worship.

The biblical character of The Task is more pronounced than Cowper's use of nature. Most of Cowper's contemporaries drew on the Bible for language and imagery, but few tried to draw authority and support for their ideas from it the way Cowper does except James Hervey, a writer whom Cowper praised as "one of the most scriptural ...in the world".[66] But whether or not Cowper used the Bible is a secondary question to that of how generally successful he is as a poet.

Evaluation as Poetry

Cowper appears in The Task not as one freed from the limitations of Evangelicalism now that Newton was at a comfortable distance in London, but as the same man who wrote the satires as a confession of his faith.[67] That The Task has a wider, more

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[65] Task, VI, 233-235.

[66] Letters, I, p. 71.

[67] Cf. Maurice J. Quinlan, William Cowper, A Critical Life (1953) p. 102.

general appeal he recognized in a letter to Lady Hesketh in 1786 praising her wisdom in sending General Cowper a copy of the second volume of his poetry before the first.[68] The differences between the two volumes, however, are more formal than essential. Cowper is more conciliatory toward minor vices, does insert some modifications of his condemnation of London and sounds less like an angry old maid sputtering vigorously about vice and virtue.

Cowper's choice of blank verse for The Task was in keeping with the convention which associated blank verse with moral instruction. Shaftesbury in his Advice to an Author, as Professor Moore has pointed out, urges the "conversion of all poetry into a medium for moral instruction" and the use of blank verse.[69] Thomson followed this instruction and defended it. Most of the descriptive-didactic poetry which immediately preceded The Task was written in blank verse.

Cowper preferred the couplet, however, since he found blank verse "more difficult than rhyme and not so amusing in the composition".[70] The need for clarity and magnificence created special problems for him.

> Blank verse, by the unusual arrangement of the words, and by the frequent infusion of one line into another, not less than by the style, which requires a kind of tragical magnificence, cannot be chargeable with much

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[68] Letters, II, p. 426.

[69] Cecil A. Moore, Backgrounds of English Literature, 1700-1760 (1953), p. 22.

[70] Letters, II, p. 257.

> obscurity,--must rather be singularly perspicuous,--to be so easily comprehended. It is my labour, and my principal one, to be as clear as possible. 71

Cowper is moderately successful in achieving clarity, and his blank verse is more chaste and simple than that of his contemporaries. But his striving for "a kind of tragical magnificence" almost always resulted in clumsy and sometimes pompous diction. That he recognized the problem is indicated by a letter to Newton written after completing The Task.

> But I do not mean to write blank verse again. Not having the music of rhyme, it requires so close an attention to the pause and the cadence, and such a peculiar mode of expression, as to render it, to me at least, the most difficult species of poetry that I have ever meddled with. 72

He did feel, however, that he had achieved more variety than others had who wrote in the medium.

> In my numbers, which I have varied as much as I could (for blank verse without variety of numbers is no better than bladder and string), I have imitated nobody, though sometimes perhaps there may be an apparent resemblance; because at the same time that I would not imitate, I have not affectedly differed. 73

Milton, however, is clearly his model in versification and description. Elton is correct, I believe, in saying, "He was inspired by the love of Milton and the love of simplicity, and his real feat is to have found a poetic language that reconciled these two affections."[74] Although he is Miltonic in his use of Latinisms,

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[71] Letters, II, p. 257.

[72] Letters, II, p. 274; see also Letters, II, p. 280.

[73] Letters, II, p. 252.

[74] Oliver Elton, A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1830 (1912), I, p. 85.

he generally avoids the "unusual syntactic order, the free inversions, sandwiched nouns and double negatives" which Deane points out as characteristic of those writing descriptive poems based on Virgilian models.[75]

His boast that he had written with greater variety and flexibility in his line was supported by the friendly review of The Task which appeared in the Gentleman's Magazine for December, 1785:

> The reader may observe, that the blank verse of this writer has more harmony and variety than are usually found in modern performances, being founded apparently on the best models, on those of Milton and Philips. The sound too is often most striking an echo of the sense. 76

More recently, Ker praised his blank verse and, rightly I believe, finds a resemblance to his couplets.

> Cowper's form of blank verse is original. It is a form of verse resembling his rhyming couplets in not putting the diction or phrase, the style of the author, emphatically and oppressively before the mind of the reader. It is a form of verse that escapes notice in order to bring out the meaning of the thought which it is the a medium for conveying. Cowper's problem was partly the same as Wordsworth's: to find a poetic interpretation of reality that should bring ideas drawn from reality into the mind of the reader without any rhetorical interruption that might distract the reader's thoughts from the sense to the style of the poet. 77

Cowper is not all that original, however, since Thomson was doing the same thing more effectively in the Seasons. Cowper is, however, more consistently "plain" than Thomson.

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[75] Deane, p. 42.

[76] Gentleman's Magazine, LV (December, 1785) p. 988.

[77] W.P. Ker, On Modern Literature (1955), p. 231.

The discipline of blank verse was a good one for Cowper. Any comparison with the satires readily shows the much greater power and flexibility he has achieved. Blank verse was a new and wise departure of which Cowper was too little aware. Later, when he had gained some distance from The Task, he uses it for "Yardley Oak" where he is much more skilful.

Cowper uses nature more extensively in The Task than he did in the satires, though not significantly more than in "Retirement". Perhaps his success with that poem encouraged him to a greater use of scenery. He also draws on the current popularity of the picturesque in his brief prospects in "The Sofa" and Book VI. His use of nature, however, is partially utilitarian; it is a point of departure for moral and religious digressions. According to the reviewer for the Gentleman's Magazine, Cowper particularly succeeded in combining beauty and usefulness. The books of The Task are

> all miscellaneous and /introduce/ a variety of amusement and instruction, much humour and pleasantry being occasionally blended, but, on the whole, the grave and serious, the moral and religious, prevail, and have the principal end in view. Seldom have we seen the utile and the dulce so agreeably united.... 78

Further he describes Cowper as "the poet of nature and humanity, and the minstrel of the groves", likening his poetry to that of Thomson and Shenstone "in the most glowing imagery of rural description, and the warmest sensibility of a good heart."[79]

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[78] Gentleman's Magazine, LV (December, 1785), p. 985.

[79] Ibid.

His praise of nature and domestic tranquility were also necessary to his personal defence of his idle life.

The Task also differs from the earlier volume in its more personal note. The satires were more objective and concerned with a life no longer his. The Task, as he himself described it, is an "account of my manner of life", and a defence of it.[80] As a result of the personal tone, the more attractive aspects of the poet's personality are allowed greater freedom. His use of the personal reference had the effect he intended, at least for some readers. After quoting the "stricken deer" passage, the reviewer in the Gentleman's Magazine said, "This come unquestionably from and to the heart. These are strains that most forcibly touch the concordant strings of humanity, how much and how often they are disregarded."[81] His "divine chit-chat", as Coleridge described his letters, appears more often. His whimsy, some times too much, occurs in his sentimental concern for animals. All of which made for more effective, less offensive, preaching. But preaching, nonetheless, his poetry remained.

The Evangelicals had encouraged the writing and publication of religious autobiography. Wesley published one a week in his Arminian Magazine. Newton's Authentic Narrative still makes exciting reading. And though Cowper's was not published during

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[80] Letters, II, p. 426.

[81] Gentleman's Magazine, LV (December, 1785), p. 987.

his life time, he did write his spiritual memoirs. Cowper's self-revelation in The Task, however, appears at times to be almost unconscious. He writes of the intimate details of his life taking it for granted that the reader will be interested or moved. As Sutherland has noted about the "stricken deer" passage, such sections "have the character of confessions; the poet is laying bare his inmost experience."[82] But this is also true of some domestic details which could have little interest to those outside Cowper's immediate circle of family and friends. However, The Task is a much more effective personal testimony to his way of life than any self-conscious autobiography.

In some ways, The Task may be seen as an extension and development of themes announced in the Poems (1782). Cowper re-covers some of the same material, the essentially biblical content continues, and his purpose as a poet remains the same. He is still the prophetic poet calling for repentance and warning of God's judgment. And yet The Task, is a much finer poem than the satires.

Cowper's Task has been frequently compared, sometimes unfavourably, with Thomson's Seasons. "The Task," Hazlitt has argued,

> has fewer blemishes than the Seasons; but it has not the same capital excellence, the 'unbought grace' of poetry, the power of moving and infusing the warmth of the author's mind into that of the reader. If Cowper had a more polished taste, Thomson had

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[82] Sutherland, p. 160.

> beyond comparison a more fertile genius, more impulsive force, a more entire forgetfulness of himself in his subject." 83

Hazlitt's chief complaint is that Cowper is too finical and effeminate. "There is an effeminacy about him, which shrinks from and repels common and hearty sympathy." He "looks over his clipped hedges, and from his well-swept garden walks."

> "He shakes hands with nature with a pair of fashionable gloves on....He is delicate to fastidiousness, and glad to get back...to the drawing room and the ladies again, to the sofa and the tea-kettle--No, I beg his pardon, not to the singing, well-scoured tea-kettle, but to the polished and loud-hissing urn." 84

Although Hazlitt's argument approaches the ad hominem and ignores Cowper's intention, he has underscored an essential weakness in Cowper. Cowper's poetry is more polished and refined than Thomson's, but Thomson presents a wider range of experience with nature, especially the more rugged aspects. A comparison of The Task with The Seasons shows it to be a poem written by a man less physically robust. In Thomson there is a vigour unaware of itself. Cowper, in contrast, assures us that he can still climb hills without being winded. Also absent is any strong response to power displayed in nature, seen in The Seasons by Thomson's preference for cataracts in contrast to Cowper's gentler naiad, and the exuberant sexuality which flaunts itself in those passages of "Spring" concerned with animal reproduction and the

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83 Hazlitt, p. 180

84 Ibid., pp. 180-181.

nude bathing scene in "Summer". In both instances, Thomson displays an open manly vigour lacking in Cowper. Hazlitt is right; there is an effeminacy about Cowper, though it is more striking in The Task than in the satires.

It may be argued, however, that the intention of Cowper's praise of nature is different from that of Thomson's. Cowper desires men to choose the country over the town because the "still small voice" is more readily heard there. Further, as Quinlan has pointed out, Cowper's association of nature with God denied him the "pagan sense of wonder, that sheer physical delight in natural phenomena that we find in most great nature poets".[85] Thomson approaches a Deistic worship of nature closed to Cowper who always sees the God who illumines nature. He sees God, then nature becomes glorious because it is God's creation.[86]

Much criticism of Cowper's poetry implicitly assumes great poetry should be about nature.[87] In so far as Cowper describes nature, he is to be praised. In so far as he concerned himself with moralizing, he was not a poet. This legacy of the Romantic critics is still predominant enough to lead to praise of The Task for that which, at least in the poet's mind, was secondary. Admitting his skill and my personal delight in such sections of The Task, the final judgment should consider the poem as a whole, and that is especially difficult to do in that few of us care

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[85]Quinlan, p. 213.

[86]Cf. Moore's comments on Thomson in op. cit.

[87]Fausset, p. 246.

for sermons even if they are well presented and in poetry.

There is a moral force, however, in The Task which does almost persuade the emotions though it may fail to meet the mind. Cowper's sensibility can approach what will strike some as sentimentalism in his discussion of his relationship to his pet hares and in his attitude toward hunting. But he does succeed in presenting his case against the hardness of the world and the essential triviality of much social life. His proclamation of the Gospel as he understood it is often eloquent, but he never quite succeeds in convincing his uncommitted reader. However, it is well to remember that the readers of his own time were less repulsed by his moralizing tendency. Burns, for example, exclaims, "Is not the Task a glorious poem? The religion of The Task, bating a few scraps of Calvinistic Divinity, is the Religion of God and Nature; the Religion that exalts, that ennobles man."[88] Elton's final assessment, however, still appears valid to me.

> The Task is neither a formal garden nor a woodland; it is more like a park cunningly and irregularly laid out, where we do not see too much at once and are for ever recrossing our own steps unexpectedly. There are grass, and water, and arbours; it is a pity that, do what we will, we should so often, round sudden corners, come on the same uncomely preaching-box amid the greenery. Still Cowper achieves his wish to secure 'much variety and no confusion' in this lively offshot of the dull old local and didactic poem.[89]

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[88] Letters, II, p. 225.

[89] Elton, I, pp. 91-92.

CHAPTER VI

AN EVANGELICAL LYRICIST: THE SHORTER POEMS

Alas for the poet! who dares undertake
  To urge reformation of national ill,
His head and his heart are both likely to ache
  With the double employment of mallet and mill.

If he wish to instruct, he must learn to delight,
  Smooth ductile and even his fancy must flow,
Must tinkle and glitter, like gold to the sight,
  And catch in its progress a sensible glow.

After all, he must beat it as thin and as fine
  As the leaf that enfolds what an invalid swallows,
For truth is unwelcome however divine,
  And unless you adorn it, a nausea follows.
("The Flatting Mill", 13-24)

While occupied with serious theme in his longer poems, Cowper was also writing shorter poems usually for the amusement of his correspondents and for his immediate circle of friends. To Newton, he described "Mary and John" as "one of those bagatelles which sometimes spring up like mushrooms in my imagination, either while I am writing or just before I begin. I sent it to you, because to you I send anything that I think may raise a smile...."[1] Cowper saw publication as a proper incentive to a poet and not just an expression of personal vanity. He therefore decided to "swell out" the first volume (1782) with a few of his shorter poems. They would also lend some variety to the longer moral disquisitions in couplets. "A variety of measures on a variety of subjects will relieve both the mind and the ear, and may possibly prevent that weariness of which there might be otherwise no small danger,"[2]

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[1] Letters, I, p. 395. [2] Letters, I, p. 296.

Cowper appears at times almost embarrassed, however, by the lack of seriousness in more of his shorter poems. He selected the better ones on hand for inclusion in his Poems (1782), and with The Task (1785) he published others. He continued adding others as new editions of his poems were published and justified himself by saying they were placed in the volumes to enlarge them and to make them more commercially desirable. He had decided earlier, for example, to exclude the shorter poems from the moral satire volume because he had "only" a few I accounted worthy to bear them company , and those for the most part on subjects less calculated for utility than amusement...."[3] Some of the shorter poems finally included had been written some years before. As Cowper mentioned to Unwin in 1786, "I have been /a dabbler in rhyme/ ever since I was fourteen years of age, when I began with translating an elegy of Tibullus."[4] Six included have been dated by Milford as w ritten before 1780, some as early as 1773: "Ode to Peace" and "The Shrubbery". Others especially the fables, may have been the reworking of poems written even earlier. By no means the majority of his shorter poems were published during his life time, and his least serious and best known, "John Gilpin", went unacknowledged until three years after publication. A number of his shorter poems were first published in widely different places. "John Gilpin", for example, first appeared in a newspaper, The Public Advertiser; others on public occasions appeared in The Gentleman's Magazine and a few of the more serious in John Wesley's Arminian Magazine.

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[3]Letters, I, P. 293. [4]Letters, III, p. 101.

The shorter poems vary widely in content, style and the occasion for which they were written, Formally, Cowper was an experimenter. He wrote sonnets and songs as well as the more conventional Augustan forms. Occasional verse on public events occupies him more frequently than one might expect from the poet of nature and retirement. His gentle humour and whimsy have freer rein and reveal the more widely enjoyed element in his poetry. Cowper is still, however, the moralist. In his fables and tales, his early interest in Gay and his admiration for Vincent Bourne appear. Any discussion of his shorter poems, however , must finally concern itself with those highly personal and moving lyrics which express his love for Mary Unwin and his sense of damnation and despair which conclude his life.

Experiments in Form

Cowper has been praised by many for his experiments with forms other than those generally used during the Augustan Age and his modification of traditional forms. "His value as a craftsman and inventor," Elton asserts, "is high. He struck out and used beautifully more than one of the styles, which were presently to be taken over into the stock of the poets and elaborated."[5] For Lady Austen he wrote the lyrics for songs which she sang for their private entertainment on a winter's evening. To his friends further away, he wrote letters in verse. Finally, from his translation and work on Milton, Cowper wrote sonnets, a form of lyric not widely admired by his contempories.

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[5]Oliver Elton, A Survey of English Literature (1928), I, p. 77.

Songs and Odes

The songs Cowper wrote to be set to music by Lady Austen are an odd assortment. One, "The Distressed Travellers; or, Labour in Vain", is witty and playful doggerel on the difficulty he and Mary had slopping through the mud in an attempt to visit Clifton on a very wet day. Presented as a dialogue, "He" sings the quatrain, and "She" answers with the refrain. Much of the song is pure nonsense, and the rollicking anapestic measure adds to the amusement. The metre is highly irregular, but as Cowper protests

> I have varied the verse for variety's sake,
> And cut it off short - because it was long.
> 'Tis hobbling and lame,
> Which critics won't blame,
> For the sense and the sound, they say, should be the same.

"Songs on Peace" and "Song, Also Written at the Request of Lady Austen" are rather like hymns written for a private person. Both were set to popular airs. "Songs of Peace" uses a hymn form (abab/8,8,8,9). The point of the song is that peace is the highest goal man may aspire to in this life; rapture and bliss are reserved "to the glorified spirits above".

"Song, Also Written at the Request of Lady Austen" is of slightly greater interest for its second stanza.

> It is content of heart
> Gives nature pow'r to please;
> The mind that feels no smart
> Enlivens all it sees;
> Can make a wintry sky
> Seem bright as smiling May,
> And evening's closing eye
> As peep of an early day.

Only when one is at peace with God does nature give delight.

With the exception of "The Loss of the Royal George", none of the songs are of much interest. They were not intended for publication and they lack the polish which his published shorter poems sometimes display. "On the Loss of Royal George" was requested by Lady Austen to fit the march in "Scipio", although Cowper wrote Joseph Hill that he wrote it in order to encourage the raising of the ship.[6] Neither the English nor the Latin version of the poem were published until 1803.

But what has caught Cowper's imagination in the incident is a motif which runs through much of his poetry. The "Royal George" did not go down in battle fighting the enemy, nor was she lost in a storm with her brave and seasoned crew battling for survival. She went down in the peace and safety of the harbour. The tolling of the bell is for the "brave", but they did not die in battle. The tolling is for "brave Kempenfelt", but he dies not with a sword, but a pen in his hand. In the midst of calm, disaster without meaning strikes.

Cowper admirably controls the tone. He is simple and direct without hysteria, though he is dealing with an incident which is much like the story of God's capricious giving and then withholding assurance of salvation from him. The form is a patriotic lament, but in Cowper's hands it become a subtle, probing and questioning

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[6] Letters, II, pp. 114-15: cf. II, p. 17.

of the justice of things rather than praise to those who died honourably.

He has managed particularly well the short six syllable line with two major stresses conveying the tolling of the bell. The narration of the sinking is economically presented with simple directness. The diction is chaste and, again, the verbs carry the weight of meaning.

Verse Letters

The letters which Cowper wrote in verse to his friends are of only incidental and biographical interest. The more Cowper wrote, the more obsessional this compulsion to write became. In any case, some pleasant verse resulted from this compulsion. As he states in "A Poetical Epistle to Lady Austen",

> Dear Anna - between friend and friend,
> Prose answers every common end;
> Serves, in a plain and homely way,
> T'express th'occurrence of the day;
> Our health, the weather, and the news;
> What walks we take, what books we choose;
> And all the floating thoughts we find
> Upon the surface of the mind.
> But when a Poet takes the pen,
> Far more alive than other men,
> He feels a gentle tingling come
> Down to his finger and his thumb,
> Derived from nature's noblest part,
> The centre of a glowing heart!

From as early as 1754 ("An Epistle to Robert Lloyd, Esq."), Cowper had written verse letters.

Usually playful in tone and personal, they were not intended for publication and none appeared until after 1800 except "An Epistle to Joseph Hill" (1785), which, though it is incidentally a public compliment to an old friend, is really rather more occupied with Cowper's complaint over the way former friends had forgotten and neglected him.

Most of the verse letters were written either in octosyllabic or decasyllabic couplets. The lines regularly have a superficial finish to them, but there are occasional and probably intentional irregularities in the lines. They reveal the same man well known through his prose letters and are in a few cases a poetic refinement of events described in prose. "To the Rev. William Bull", for example, is a poetic apology to Bull for Cowper's condemnation of tobacco in "Conversation".

Cowper wrote many shorter poems to his friends on various occasions. Often included as additions to his letters, they express again the poet's desire to maintain and cultivate those who had benefited him. At their most personal, their chief interest is not as poetry but as autobiography. "To Lady Austen, Written in Rainy Weather", for example, was included as a brief verse introduction to a note to her, August 12, 1782, when foul weather prevented her usual daily visit to Cowper and Mary Unwin. It reveals more of Cowper the man than of Cowper the poet. Few of Cowper's shorter poems were intended for publication, and few warrant it.

Cowper clearly distinguished between those "bagatelles" he dashed off because of his tickling finger, his itch to write, and those poems he intended for public examination and edification. "To the Rev. William Cawthorne Unwin" and "To the Rev. Mr. Newton", for example, differ from most of the other lyrics written to particular persons by his intention to publish. The poem to Newton was initially a private poem, a graceful invitation for a visit. Published, it is a compliment to his friend whom he called the "editor" of the 1782 edition of his poems in which the poem was included. "To Unwin" was intended from the beginning as almost a dedicatory poem to Mary's son who was both a friend and son to Cowper. It not only praises his friend, but asserts the primary purpose of the volume: to "reclaim a vicious age" and "a plan / That holds in view the good of man." The more personal element is absent; the poem is public in character and more carefully written.

Sonnets

With the exception of one, all of Cowper's sonnets were written in 1792 and 1793 after he had translated Milton's Latin and Italian poems and while he was preparing notes for his English poems. The debt to Milton is obvious, but Cowper wrote by no means a slavish imitation. In all Cowper wrote eight sonnets. In addition, an early poem, "On Observing Some Names of Little Note recorded in the Biographia Britannia" (enclosed in a letter to Unwin, September 3, 1780 and published in 1782), is written in fourteen lines using the couplet as were all his poems written at this time.

The organization of the thought, however, is in the usual Italian division between the octave and the sestet. The octave, a generalized statement, is followed by a concrete comparison in the sestet.

> So when a child, as playful children use,
> Has burnt to tinder a stale last year's news,
> The flame extinct, he views the roving fire--
> There goes my lady, and there goes the squire.
> There goes the parson, oh! illustrious spark,
> And there, scarce less illustrious, goes the clerk!

Certainly this is hardly illustrious poetry.

The other early sonnet, "Sonnet. Addressed to Henry Cowper, Esq., Clerk Assistant to the House of Lords", was written February 1788 and published the following April in The Gentleman's Magazine. Closely following the rhyme scheme for the Italian sonnet (abba, abba,cde,cde), the octave is divided into two quatrains. The sestet is a unit only in rhyme rather than content and provides no contrast to the octave. A rather stiff poem, it shows little feeling for the sonnet form.

The two sonnets Cowper wrote in April and May of 1792 show a more self-conscious groping after form. "Sonnet. To William Wilberforce, Esq.", printed in The Northampton Mercury in April 1792, has an unusual rhyme pattern: abba,ba,cddccd,ee. The concluding couplet gives a slight Shakespearean effect to the sonnet, but there is no internal grouping in either the manner of the Italian or the English sonnet. The second sonnet, "To Dr. Austin, Of Cecil Street, London", written the following month, though written in couplets, follows more closely the English form.

The poem breaks into three quatrains and is clinched at the end with a couplet. The content as well is more traditional. He desires to immortalize Dr. Austin in verse in gratitude to him for restoring Mrs. Unwin again to health.

The final group of five sonnets was written between June 2, 1792 and June 29, 1793, and published after his death. All show some similarity in form. All have the usual octave (abba,abba) and a sestet modified to end with a couplet (cdcd,ee, except for the first which has cdccdd). They are a mixture of the Italian and English forms. The octave allows a sustained statement and the couplet encourages a tight, aphoristic conclusion. The first and the last of this group were written to William Hayley, the first after their meeting, and the last declining to write with him an extended poem and expressing his restivness in working on his commentary on Milton. Both are highly personal but lack lyrical force. The same may be said of "To George Romney, Esq...." It is elegant and touched only with a shadow of melancholy. The octave praises the painter's skill in portraying the poet; the next quatrain modifies the praise by observing the lack of sombreness in the interpretation. The concluding couplet explains the lack graciously by attributing it to Hayley's hospitality which kept the poet's spirit high. It is a graceful compliment to both Romney and to Hayley.

The final two sonnets are worthy of closer attention. "To John Johnson" was written on the occasion of his presenting Cowper with a bust of Homer. Johnny Johnson, in Cowper's later years, had become increasingly a son rather than a cousin to Cowper. The opening quatrain thanks his kinsman for the gift and the second is a stronger statement of his regard and affection for the young man. The third quatrain expresses his bitterness over being trapped by translation.

> The grief is this, that sunk in Homer's mine
> I lose my precious years, now soon to fail,
> Handling his gold, which, howsoever it shine,
> Proves dross, when balanc'd in the Christian scale.

Cowper concludes with an exhortation that Johnson follow rather their common poet forefather, Donne, and "Seek heav'nly wealth, and work for God alone".

"Sonnet to Mrs. Unwin", written in May 1793, is perhaps the best known of Cowper's sonnets.

> Mary! I want a lyre with other strings;
> Such aid from Heaven as some have feign'd they drew!
> An eloquence scarce given to mortals, new,
> And undebas'd by praise of meaner things!
> That, ere through age or woe I shed my wings,
> I may record thy worth, with honour due,
> In verse as musical as thou art true,--
> Verse, that immortalizes whom it sings!
> But thou hast little need: there is a book,
> By seraphs writ with beams of heav'nly light,
> On which the eyes of God not rarely look;
> A chronicle of actions just and bright!
> There all thy deeds, my faithful Mary, shine,
> And since thou own'st that praise, I spare thee mine.

The octave follows the Italian form. Cowper desires a new lyre, a new mode, to sing Mary's praise before, "through age or woe", he sheds his poetic wings.

The modified sestet counters the octave. Yet there is no need for him to praise her since all her virtues have been recorded in God's book by the angels for God to read. The concluding couplet neatly ties the knot.

Cowper's finest sonnet, it is a kind of Evangelical love poem. He carefully keeps primary their mutual love for God as the ground for his love for her. He thereby sets aside the conventional desire to immortalize another in a poem; her memory will always be fresh in the mind of God. What remains to him is the humbler, yet more personal and tender love of man which he has toward her.

In the letter to Lady Hesketh which enclosed the sonnet "To William Wilberforce" (April 26, 1792), Cowper had said something of sonnets, "for my own part I like them much, when they are on subjects proper to them; such, I mean, as are best expressed in a close sententious manner, for they are too short to admit a loose one."[7] From an examination of his own sonnets, it appears that for those sonnets he intended for publication, the subject is in every case addressed to a public figure on an occasion when praise was in order. This is particularly true for "Sonnet...Henry Cowper" and "To William Wilberforce". The praise given is of a personal nature and the occasion is private in all the others.

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[7] Letters, IV, p. 193.

Generally Cowper is more successful with the private expression than the public. When he ventures on public issues, he regularly becomes too abstract and falls into rather pale generalizations.

Through the sonnet, he praises his friends. His better sonnets have the casualness of his letters rather than his more tightly constructed longer poems. Although Cowper learned the sonnet form from Milton, he modifies it and makes it into a form strictly his own. It is notable, for example, that Milton in his English sonnets only once used a couplet at the end of a sonnet. In three of his five sonnets written in Italian, he does use the couplet. In translating these, Cowper kept the same form (abba, abba,cdcdee) for all five. In his mixture of the Italian and English forms, Cowper consistently used the Italian octave, but for the sestet, the first four lines tend to be grouped as a unit thereby giving additional stress to the concluding couplet. The result is too frequently a loss of what Cowper called "a close sententious manner." Cowper is rarely effective in this shorter form. The quality of his mind was discursive, and he rebelled at too tight a rein.

Occasional Verse on Public Events

Cowper, a poet interested in reforming his age, wrote a number of shorter poems on particular public events. Unlike his more personal verse, Cowper may have intended more of these for publication.

As a result, they show greater care in writing and concern with more conventional poetic forms. Few of these poems are worthy of notice, however.

Writing on public events, as Cowper noted, is hazardous. By the time the poem is finished, the situation may have so altered as to destroy the poem's effect. "To Sir Joshua Reynolds" is one of several poems expressing Cowper's concern with the progress of the war to suppress the rebellious American colonies. In the poem, he directs Reynolds to paint a patriotic picture expressing the defeat of the colonies and the subsequent embarrasment of France and Holland for aiding them. By the time the poem was completed, the war had ended differently. "The Modern Patriotic", however, was written in general enough terms to survive the unexpected outcome of the war and was published in Poems (1782). In an attempt to be ironic, Cowper urges the so-called patriots to greater extremes. Cowper's occasional verse tends more to patriotism than to moral reproof, but moral reproof is generally implied.

He wrote three poems in 1789 concerned with the illness of the king and his recovery: "Annus Mirabilis, 1789", "On the Queen's Visit" and "On the Benefit Received by His Majesty from Sea-Bathing". Apparently intended for publication, none appeared during his life time, and not one of them contributes to his reputation as a poet. "Annus Mirabilis, 1789, Written in Commeration of His Majesty's Happy Recovery" is the most ambitious of the three.

Written in octosyllabic couplets, the first half of the poem (31 lines) tells of his seeking a topic for a poem in old chronicles and in present events. The subject is finally discovered, a theme to ennoble his lines, the restoration of the king to health. A few lines will indicate the nature of Cowper's achievement.

> The spring of eighty-nine shall be
> An aera cherish'd long by me,
> Which joyful I will oft record,
> And thankful at my frugal board;
> For then the clouds of eighty-eight,
> That threatened England's trembling state
> With loss of what she least could spare,
> Her sov'reign's tutelary care,
> One breath of Heav'n, that cry'd--Restore!
> Chas'd, never to assemble more,
> And far the richest crown on Earth,
> If valued by its wearer's worth,
> The symbol of a righteous reign.

Similar to most of his shorter lyrics, this one is also ridiculous metrically as well as bathetic. Alliteration is used for its own sake, and his diction becomes almost a parody of that suitable for such poems. "On the Queen's Visit to London. The Night of the 17th March, 1789", also written in commemoration of the king's recovery, is rather sodden; again the rhythm is thumping and some rather ludicrous passages (especially stanza 14 and following) occur.

That Cowper would versify anything, especially if moral instruction might thereby be imparted, is shown by his series of mortuary verses appended to the yearly bill of mortality of Northampton.

Each of the six he was asked to contribute is an occasion to remind the reader of the likelihood of his death in the coming year and, therefore, the need to be prepared. Judgment follows the grave, but to those who believe, death can be welcome.

> Follow Christ, and all is paid:
> His death your peace ensures:
> Think on the grave where he was laid,
> And calm descend to yours.
> ("On a Similar Occasion. For the Year 1792")

One would hardly recognize these as written by the same poet who wrote The Task.

Of greaterinterest are the five poems Cowper wrote concerned with the plight of the Negro slaves. "The Negro's Complaint", probably written in February, 1788, first published in the Arminian Magazine for September, 1790, and later in The Gentleman's Magazine for December, 1793, is written in a hymn form (ababcdcd/8's and 7's, trochaic tetrameter). The basis for his argument is that skin colour and curliness of hair are accidents, not essentials, in man. The qualities Englishmen praise as worthy of Christian gentlemen should be expressed as well to the Negro as to the white man. "The Morning Dream", also published in The Gentleman's Magazine (November, 1788), tells of a vision in which the poet sees England, traditionally a defender of freedom, resolve to practise her boast and no longer trade in slaves. The anapaestic trimeter in which the peem is written attempts to convey the feeling of a boat sailing westward. Also anapaestic, "Sweet Meat Has Sour Sauce; or, The Slave-Trader in the Dumps" is a curious rollicking song using a three line stanza (aaa) with the refrain

> Which nobody can deny, deny,
> Which nobody can deny.

The trader sings of the gear and tackle which he must now put up for sale since he must discontinue his buying and selling of slaves. "Pity the Poor Africans" is also in anapaestic tetrameter (aabb). As in the preceding poems, there is an intentional conflict established between the seriousness of his theme and the careless anapaestic rhythm. The narrator is displayed as defending an effeminate argument to refute the implied moral condemnation of the slave trade. His two arguments in defence are that without the slave trade, some consumer articles would be unattainable.

> I pity them greatly, but I must be mum,
> For how could we do without sugar and rum?
> Especially sugar, so needful we see?
> What? give up our desserts, our coffee, our tea!

And the second, that if England retires from the trade, the French, Dutch and Danes will continue, so if there is profit to be made from it, why stay out? Cowper is unable to sustain the irony and quickly moves to an answer. Using an illustration of the boy who objects to stealing apples, but joins in on hearing the same kind of argument.

> His scruples thus silenc'd, Tom felt more at ease
> And went with his comrades the apples to seize;
> He blam'd and protested, but join'd in the plan;
> He shar'd in the plunder, but pitied the man.

Cowper seriously lacked the ability to use irony when irony would have been most effective. He is too afraid of being misunderstood, and perhaps failed to see the greater seriousness which the comic may convey. He is too much the teacher and too little the artist. When he does use irony well, it is only for brief stretches, as in

his "Epigram":

> To purify their wine some people bleed
> A lamb into the barrel, and succeed;
> No nostrum, planters say, is half so good
> to make fine sugar, as a negro's blood
> Now lambs and negroes both are harmless things
> And thence perhaps this wond'roud virtue springs,
> 'Tis in the blood of innocence alone--
> Good cause why planters never try their own.

Even here, however, he is too serious. When Cowper uses comedy and humour well, it is always on a less serious theme. Morality is not to be furthered by laughter, one fears he believed.

Humour and Whimsy

Some of Cowper's most delightful and well-remembered poems are those innocently mirthful. Among these, several reveal the kind of humour one might expect of one trained in law. An early one published with the first volume of poems, "Report of an Adjudged Case, not to be Found in Any of the Books", concluded a letter to Unwin in December, 1780.

> Poetical reports of law cases are not very common, yet it seems to me desirable that they should be so. Many advantages would accrue from such a measure. They would, in the first place, be more commodiously deposited in the memory, just as linen, grocery, or other such matter, when neatly packed, are known to occupy less room, and to lie more conveniently in any trunk, chest, or box to which they may be committed. In the next place, being divested of that infinite circumlocution, and the endless embarrassment in which they are involved by it, they would become surprisingly intelligible, in comparison with their present obscurity. And lastly, they would by this means be rendered susceptible of musical embellishment, and instead of being quoted in courts, with that dull monotony, which is so wearisome to by-standers, and frequently lulls even the judges themselves to sleep, might be rehearsed in recitative, which would have an admirable effect in keeping the attention fixed and lively,

and could not fail to disperse that heavy atmosphere of sadness and gravity which hangs over the jurisprudence of our country.[9]

The poem which followed is a debate between the eyes and the nose over to whom a pair of spectacles belong. "Tongue" is the lawyer who argues both sides, and "Ear" the judge.

Between Nose and Eyes a strange contest arose,--
The spectacles set them unhappily wrong;
The point in dispute was, as all the world knows,
To which the said spectacles ought to belong.

So Tongue was the lawyer, and argued the cause,
With a great deal of skill, and a wig full of learning;
While chief baron Ear sat to balance the laws,
So fam'd for his talent in nicely discerning.

In behalf of the Nose, it will quickly appear,
And your lordship, he said, will undoubtedly find,
That the Nose has had spectacles always in wear,
Which amounts to possession time out of mind.

Then holding the spectacles up to the court,--
Your lordship observes they are made with a straddle,
As wide as the ridge of the Nose is; in short,
Design'd to sit close to it, just like a saddle.

Again, would your lordship a moment suppose,
('Tis a case that has happen'd, and may be again)
That the visage or countenance had not a Nose!
Pray who would, or who could, wear spectacles then?

On the whole, it appears--and my argument shows
With a reasoning the court will never condemn,
That the spectacles plainly were made for the Nose,
And the Nose was as plainly intended for them.

Then shifting his side, (as a lawyer knows how)
He pleaded again in behalf of the Eyes;
But what were his arguments few people know,
For the court did not think they were equally wise.

So his lordship decreed, with a grave solemn tone,
Decisive and clear, without one if or but--
That whenever the Nose put his spectacles on,
By day-light or candle-light--Eyes should be shut!

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9 Letters. I, pp. 253-54

Although Cowper's use of anapaestic tetrameter is again intrusively obvious, his careful sketching of the gestures of Tongue presents a pleasing caricature of the lawyer. The tone is consistent and he does not tumble into moral instruction at the end. As seen before both in the satires and in The Task, Cowper is especially skilled in the portrayal of a character or a small dramatic situation. He includes only a minimum of detail, and yet he evokes the essence of the scene.

Much less successful is another debate poem in anapaestic tetrameter, "To the Rev. Mr. Newton," written May 28, 1782. In this poem, pipe complains of his fall from popularity in contrast to snuff-box who answers that neither are to blame since both are merely receptacles for what others put into them. The tone is too serious and may contain one of Cowper's few failures in taste. Pipe insists

> My breath is as sweet as the breath of blown roses,
> While you [snuff] are a nuisance where'er you appear;
> There is nothing but sniv'ling and blowing of noses,
> Such a noise as turns any man's stomach to hear.

One of the better stanzas, however is a good illustration of the way in which Cowper can use the quite ordinary by seeing it freshly and with humour.

> Then lifting his lid in a delicate way,
> And op'ning his mouth whith a smile quite engaging,
> The box in reply was heard plain to say,
> What a silly dispute is this we are waging!

Related to his humour is the element of whimsy which so frequently occurs in Cowper to relax what is too often a rather sober moral lesson. The best example among the shorter poems is a

set of two, "On a Spaniel Called Beau Killing a Young Bird" and "Beau's Reply". Written in common meter, the first poem is Cowper's reproof to Beau for killing a small bird not out of need for food but with the same blood lust that leads men to hunt for sport.

> My dog! What remedy remains,
> Since, teach you all I can,
> I see you, after all my pains,
> So much resemble man!

Though not offensively, the moral is trotted in. "Beau's Reply", though not contradicting the moral lesson of the first poem, pleasantly lays at the poet's feet a greater charge. Beau pleads "nature" as the cause of his misdemeanour and reminds Cowper that he has been careful in the past not to bother birds.

> Let my obedience then excuse
> My disobedience now,
> Nor some reproof yourself refuse
> From your aggriev'd Bow-wow!
>
> If killing birds be such a crime,
> (Which I can hardly see)
> What think you, Sir, of killing time
> With verse address'd to me?

The laughter evoked is gentle and moral rather than hearty and robust.

That Cowper is capable of a more hearty laughter is indicated by the continuously popular "The Diverting History of John Gilpin, Showing how he went farther than he intended, and came safely home again". Published anonymously in The Public Advertiser, November 14, 1782 in book form by Johnson in 1783, probably at the suggestion of Unwin,[10]

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[10] Letters, 11, p. 16.

and included with The Task in 1785, Cowper appears to have been surprised at its immediate popularity. Characteristically, Cowper was embarrassed by the poem.

> I little thought when I was writing the history of John Gilpin, that he would appear in print--I intended to laugh, and to make two or three others laugh, of whom you were one. But now all the world laughs, at least if they have the same relish for a tale ridiculous in itself, and quaintly told, as we have.--Well--they do not always laugh so innocently, or at so small an expense--for in a world like this, abounding with subjects for satire, and with satirical wits to mark them, a laugh that hurts nobody has at least the grace of novelty to recommend it. Swift's darling motto was, Vive la bagatelle--a good wish for a philosopher of his complexion, the greater part of whose wisdom, whencesoever it came, most certainly came not from above. La bagatelle has no enemy in me, though it has neither so warm a friend, nor so able a one, as it had in him. If I trifle, and merely trifle, it is because I am reduced to it by necessity--a melancholy, that nothing else so effectually disperses, engages me sometimes in the arduous task of being merry by force. And strange as it may seem, the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and, but for that saddest mood, perhaps had never been written at all. To say truth, it would be but a shocking vagary, should the mariners on board a ship buffeted by a terrible storm, employ themselves in fiddling and dancing; yet sometimes much such a part act I.[11]

When Newton commended the poem as being harmless and possibly beneficial, Cowper recalls rather with distress, that if he still had his earlier radiant faith, he would never have written anything so useless.[12] Nevertheless, it may help to circulate The Task and the morality he wished to teach.

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11 Letters, II, pp. 26-27.

12 Letters, II, p. 314.

> Like you, I see, or think I can see, that Gilpin may have his use. Causes, in appearance trivial, produce often the most beneficial consequences; and perhaps my volumes may now travel to a distance, which, if they had not been ushered into the world by that notable horseman, they would never have reached.[13]

The poem is innocent enough by any standard.

Cowper was a man who enjoyed a good tale, especially one which displayed the folly of man's pretentions to dignity. In his letters are many short accounts of stable members of society who are made to appear foolish by their inability to manage simple affairs. The visit of the candidate to solicit Cowper's support and the beating letter are two of the better known examples.[14] In a letter to Newton, February 25, 1781, Cowper discusses the qualities of a good story, qualities which he displays in "John Gilpin". "He that tells a long story should take care that it be not made a long story by his manner of telling it. His expression should be natural, and his method clear; the incidents should be interrupted by very few reflections, and parentheses should be entirely discarded.[15]

The first third of "John Gilpin" is concerned with necessary exposition. The scene is set and the action begins. The Gilpin family is one of serious industry, humility and

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13 Letters, II, p. 315

14 Letters, II, pp. 182-84 and II, pp. 123-24.

15 Letters, I, p. 274.

frugality. Gilpin himself is a citizen of "credit and renown" and a "train-band captain" well known in London. His marriage has been stable and enduring, but to Mrs. Gilpin, it has been "twice ten tedious years" without a holiday. Clearly a firm and frugal women, she has a keen sense of her own importance and the best way to impress the neighbours.

> The morning came, the chaise was brought,
> But yet was not allow'd
> To drive up to the door, lest all
> Should say that she was proud.
>
> So three doors off the chaise was stay'd
> Where they did all get in ....

And in a spot where others could see them set off the better. But they did not all get in. The chaise, of course, is for Mrs. Gilpin and her possessions.

> My sister, and my sister's child
> Myself, and children three
> Will fill the chaise.

Gilpin rides "after we" on horseback, an attendant to his queen. The wife's frugality is shown in her taking their wine with them to the Bull at Edmonton.[16] A solid business man, Gilpin once mounted, dismounts to catch one last sale before going off on his first holiday in twenty years. The holiday is clearly Mrs. Gilpin's; one almost forgets that it is their wedding aniversary dinner since Mrs. Gilpin hardly finds room for the groom.

With Gilpin's character established, and that of his loving wife, the riotous ride begins. With economy of detail, Cowper sketches the destruction of Gilpin's trappings with dignity. As

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16 M. L. R. Breslar, "John Gilpin's Ride," N&Q, 9th Series, XII (November 28, 1903), p. 437. An interesting note on the customs governing wines in the commercial rooms of country hotels of the period.

they go, piece by piece, he is humiliated before the community to the same states he occupies before his wife. He cannot control his horse, and as the pace increases, he loses his scarlet cloak. This loss exposes the symbols of his wife's niggardly frugality, the two stone wine bottles which had been hidden beneath, tied to his belt. These are soon broken and only the ear-like handles remain. Then his hat and wig go in the wind. Gilpin is left clinging in a most undignified fashion to the runaway horse, not malicious by nature but as puzzled by his rider as the variety of onlookers are who see Gilpin's ride. When the horse arrives at his home at Ware, the return ride develops and amplifies Gilpin's loss of dignity. Now he must wear a borrowed wig and hat much too large, both of which he again loses. On the return ride, he is not simply mistaken to be running a race but is also called a thief and others join in pursuit. The humiliation is complete.

Cowper's manner of telling the tale is direct and simple. He relies on a minimum of details to create primarily a visual impression of the scene at key points along the ride. The tempo is fast in accordance with the pace of the action. It is his eye for detail which is particularly effective. The tale gains from his development of the unexpected and the ironic. Gilpin, for example, is keenly aware of appearances.

> Said John--It is my wedding-day,
> And all the world would stare,
> If wife should dine at Edmonton
> And I should dine at Ware!
>
> So, turning to his horse, he said--
> I am in haste to dine;
> 'Twas for your pleasure you came here
> You shall go back for mine.

Ah, luckless speech, and bootless boast,
For which he paid full dear;
For, while he spake, a braying ass
Did sing most loud and clear;

Whereat his horse did snort, as he
Had heard a lion roar,
And gallop'd off with all his might,
As he had done before.

Finally, though the story might have had a moral appended on the discrepancy between appearance and reality and the folly of human vanity, Cowper withholds his sermon, but he does include some delightful mock-moralizing, as in the third stanza quoted above. His choice of a weak, conscientious, serious man for his hero was shrewd. His selection and organization of the elements is excellent.

In the midst of laughter, however, there is the characteristic note which makes the poem unmistakably Cowper's. It is perhaps his psychosis, which led him to present as comic the picture of a man terrifyingly out of control through circumstances beyond him. The disintegration occurs, also in the midst of what should have been a calm and peaceful ride to the Bull at Edmonton. The terror is so much greater than what appears immediately on the surface. While we join the spectators, Gilpin's life is in danger. As Cowper said, playing the harlequin helped him through the tragedy of his own existence, and part of that tragedy darkly underscores his laughter. In the midst of his garden also lurked the terror of madness and disintegration which at any moment might overtake him.

Fables and Tales

Among his shorter poems, a significant number are fables and tales.

Brief narratives appealed to Cowper, and he is frequently at his best when he describes a brief incident in his long poems and in his letters. The Fable may have attracted him because of its use of plants and animals familiar to him. It was also a form which was useful morally as well as delightful.

Cowper refers to fables which he read as a boy, some of which he memorized.[17] He clearly saw fables as suitable reading for the young and recommended Dryden's Fables for Unwin's son, John, along with Milton's Allegro, II Peneroso, and Paradise Lost, and Thomson's Seasons.

> I believe there are some of Dryden's Fables which he [John] would find very entertaining; they are for the most part fine compositions, and not above his apprehension; but Dryden has written a few things that arenot blotted here and there with an unchaste allusion, so that you must pick his way for him, lest he should tread in the dirt.[18]

During his own youth, he had read Watts' Divine Songs (which may also be a source of his early fear of God) and Gay's Fables. The closing days of his life he spent translating Gay's Fables into Latin verse. It was probably from Gay that he chose his form. Like Gay, Cowper generally uses octosyllabic couplets. Like Gay, he usually begins with a statement of the case and then moves into a fable by way of illustration, sometimes concluding with an explicit moral. And like Gay, Cowper's humanitarianism extends to a concern for animals. Gay had seen the fable as a means of correcting the follies of the

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17 Analytical Review, IV (May, 1789), pp. 29-36.

18 Letters, I, p. 431.

time, a kind of satire (cf. his "The Dog and the Fox"). His Fables (1726) share much of Cowper's concern about the reproof of certain social and personal evils. Cowper's Evangelical condemnation of card playing as a destruction of time better used in other ways, for example, is shared by Gay.[20] Gay, however, differs from Cowper in his analysis of the cause of man's alienation from God. Gay is generally concerned throughout his Fables with the acceptance of one's place in life, in the scale of being. Anxiety is the curse on him who wants to change, either up the scale or downward, and in his fables, he gives examples of both.

Cowper had noted in The Task that there were three virtues man could learn more readily from observing animals than from watching man; attachment, fidelity, and gratitude.

> But learn we might, if not too proud to stoop
> To quadrupede instructors, many a good
> And useful quality, and virtue too,
> Rarely examplified among ourselves.
> (The Task, VI, 621-24.

In the fable and tales these qualities are the ones most generally stressed for the instruction of the reader. These qualities are particularly applied in the relationships of friendship and marriage.

Friendship was one of the classical virtues widely praised. Christian treaching also re-enforced it since Jesus taught that the Christian should be known by his love for his fellows. The Evangelicals stressed Christian hospitality as a cardinal virtue. According to Cower, however, Friendship had come to be merely the

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20 John Gay, Fables (1726), I, p. 160: ll.25-30.

casual mixing of people in mob-like social gatherings. In "The Faithful Friend", he tells of the loyal friendship of one goldfinch for another. Dick had escaped from his cage but refused to fly away leaving his friend Tom still in prison. From this, says Cowper, we may see true friendship expressed in contrast to that seen at balls and routs.

One of his better fables, "The Poet, the Oyster, and Sensitive Plant", was written on the theme of the need for pity, sympathy, and love among friends. Earlier in "the Rose", using the analogy of an incident in the garden, Cowper had taught that one needed to be gentle and tender with the beautiful. In "the Poet, the Oyster, and the Sensitive Plant", the Oyster had complained of his cruel fate in an unfeeling world, In answer, the Sensitive Plant considered the Oyster fortunate since the plant's sensitivity made him prey to the touch of all who passed. The poet, overhearing the exchange, reproves them both and asserts that the noblest minds are moved by pity, sympathy, and love. In this poem, Cowper modifies the structure of the traditional fable by entering into the dialogue himself to speak the moral.

Fidelity in the closer relationship of marriage also concerned Cowper. It is rather curious that he as a batchelor should have been so concerned about marital fidelity and the preservation of the family unit. The issue had become, however, a central one in the century. The enactment of the marriage laws (1753) had been only one step in a discussion which continued well into the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it became a particularly urgent issue among

Evangelicals, and Cowper's family in particular, when his cousin, Martin Madan, published his proposal for the encouraging of polygamy as a means of curing the evils of prostitution. "The Doves" and "Anti-thelyphthora" were written by Cowper in opposition to Madan's views. In "The Doves", the poet overhears the conversation between a dove and her mate in which she pledges her eternal fidelity to her husband but warns him against wandering into strange nests. The moral is implied rather than stated.

> Thus sang the sweet sequester'd bird
> Soft as the passing wind,
> And I recorded what I heard--
> A lesson for mankind.

Less serious and more playful, "Pairing Time Anticipated. A Fable" is concerned to teach the proper time to marry. Quarreling with Rousseau's speculations on whether birds can understand each other, Cowper presents a congress of birds who have gathered to celebrate St. Valentine's Day. A Bullfinch and Finch exchange speeches before all rush off the couple in spite of the early season. As a result, however, when winter suddenly descends, again, the eggs are addled, and the mates pick at each other. The "Instruction" is obvious: Choose a proper time to marry as well as a proper mate.

All finches, however, do not leave their mates in times of trouble. In Scotland, he tells us in "A Tale", two chaffinches, finding no proper trees in that barren waste, build their nest at the mast top of a ship. When the ship sails, the male flies to rejoin his mate at sea. Thus birds "instruct us how to love".

Cowper does not always use animals for moral instructors to man. For negative instruction, human beings are rather better. "Mutual

Forbearance Necessary to the Happiness of the Married State" is a comic dialogue with sermon attached. A dialogue is presented between the wife and old Sir Humphry who cannot hear a word she says. Because of his deafness, they are constantly at cross-purposes, and she is rude and inconsiderate. The moral is obvious; love should overlook faults, such as deafness, which cannot be cured.

> The love that cheers life's latest stage,
> Proof against sickness and old age,
> Preserv'd by virtue from declension,
> Becomes not weary of attention;
> But lives, when that exterior grace
> Which first inspir'd the flame decays.
> 'Tis gentle, delicate, and kind,
> To faults compassionate or blind,
> And will with sympathy endure
> Those evils it would gladly cure:
> But angry, coarse, and harsh expression
> Shows love to be a mere profession;
> Proves that the heart is none of his,
> or soon expels him if it is.
> (49-62)

Both "Love Abused" and "Anti-thelyphthora. A Tale in Verse" are outgrowths of Cowper's indigation with his cousin Martin Madan. "Love Abused", written in a letter to Unwin (July 27, 1780), exclaims

> What is there in the vale of life
> Half so delightful as a wife,
> When friendship, love, and peace combine
> To stamp the marriage bond divine.

Such a life of tranquility can be destroyed by lust, "a lawless head-strong flood/ Impregnated with ooze and mud...." (11-12). "Antithelyphrhora", published anonymously as a quarto pamphlet in 1781, is an allegory of what happens to man when lust becomes dominant over him. Sir Airy Del Castro, a knight (Martin Madan), is led astray by a most beguiling mistress, Hypothesis, daughter of Fancy,

reared in the land of Dreams. Inspired by her, he maintains the "wildest project of her teeming brain" (l. 57):

> That wedlock is not rig'rous as suppos'd
> But man, within a wider pale enclos'd
> May rove at will, where appetite shall lead,
> Free as the lordly bull that ranges o'er the mead;
> That forms and rites are tricks of human law,
> As idle as the chatt'ring of a daw;
> That lewd incontinence and lawless rape,
> Are marriage in its true and proper shape;
> That man by faith and truth is made a slave,
> The ring a bauble, and the priest a knave.
> (58-67)

This achieved, he rushes off to a thicket with the woman, who has had various affairs before. At the sight of lust so unrestrained, all virtue is aghast. Sir Martin Madan comes to the rescue, challenges Sir Airy to combat, and slays both him and his mistress. Thus virtuous marriage and fidelity triumph. It is an ungainly poem in couplets, the authorship of which Cowper later tried to conceal.

Unlike Gay's, a number of Cowper's fables and tales are Evangelical in varying degrees of attitude and tone. "The Pine-Apple and the Bee", published in 1782, is of special interest. Another poem on the same subject is extant which may be an earlier version. "The Bee and The Pine-Apple" is only twenty-four lines in length and, like "The Pine-Apple and the Bee", is written in octosyllabic couplets. The first ten lines of "The Bee" present the situation: A bee, attracted by the odour of the pineapple in a hot-frame, attempts unsuccessfully to penetrate the glass. The apricot and peach blossoms readily available to him fail to attract because of his vain desire for the unattainable. The gardener watches the episode and speaks

to be bee.

Poor restless bee'.
I learn philosophy from thee,
I learn how just it is and wise,
To use what Providence supplies,

I learn that comfort dwells alone
In that which Heav'n has made our own,
That fools incur no greater pain,
Than pleasure coveted in vain.
(13-16, 21-24)

Short as the poem is, the statement of the situation is cluttered by weak parallels drawn between the pineapple and the available fruit blossoms. The application is too direct a form of preaching, heavy in utile, light in dulce.

In contrast, "The Pine-Apple and the Bee" is more carefully written and more fully developed. The opening statement occupies two more lines than in the earlier version, but is is trimmer and more tightly organized. Now there are "pine-apples, in triple row" which receive all the attention. No other flowers or fruit distract. In the earlier version, the bee "lick'd the glass that interpos'd...The flow'rs that blow'd within his reach,/ Were arrant drugs compar'd with that,/ He strove so violently to get at." In the second version, this becomes

A bee of most discerning taste
Perceive'd the fragrance as he pass'd
On eager wing the spoiler came,
And search'd for crannies in the frame,
Urg'd his attempt on ev'ry side,
To ev'ry pane his trunk applied;

Thus having wasted half the day,
He trimm'd his flight another way.
(3-8, 10-12)

Notice the way in which his verbs have been strengthened ("search'd",

"urg'd", "trimm'd"), and the prosaic flatness had disappeared. In their place we find adjectives which are verbal in force: "eager wing" and "discerning taste". The noun "spoiler" is not merely a name but an action. The changes are towards greater economy of detail, towards simplicity, with an increase in strength of line and tension.

The second verse paragraph of sixteen lines is totally new. First, the abstract statement is given. What Cowper had taken fourteen lines to say before now becomes

> in thee I find
> The sin and madness of mankind.
> To joys forbidden man aspires,
> Consumes his soul with vain desires
> Folly the spring of his pursuit,
> And disappointment all the fruit.
> (13-18)

This is Cowper at his flat, prosaic worst again. The terms are largely Evangelical cant: "sin and madness", "joys forbidden", "consumes his soul", "fruit", "vain desires", and "folly". Not one abstraction is given any life or power. The inversions in the first and third lines have no logic or purpose except to provide the rhyme.

This barren spot passed, however, he introduces two concrete human parallels to the bee's folly. Cynthio, in her chariot, "ogles as she passes" the male "bees" who are separated from her by the glass panels of the doors. The second parallel is a maid attracted by the glitter of jewelry.

> The maid who views with pensive air
> The show-glass fraught with flitt'ring ware,
> Sees watches, bracelets, rings, and lockets,
> But sighs at thought of empty pockets;
> Like thine, her appetite is keen,
> But ah, the cruel glass between!
> (23-28)

The moral follows. So man is like this.

> With hopeless wish one looks and lingers;
> One breaks the glass, and cuts his fingers;
> But they whom truth and wisdom lead,
> Can gather honey from a weed.
> (33-36)

The moral is more complex than in the first and is presented with less bluntness. This poem is an example as well of the way in which Evangelical jargon can intrude into Cowper's poetry and disrupt at least what would otherwise be an organically sound poem.

In contrast to the lighter reproof of "The Pine-Apple and the Bee", "A Fable" is a study in muted terror. Also in octosyllabic couplets, the situation is presented in the opening twenty-nine lines and the moral in ten. A raven in April, "as the bumpkins say,/The legislature call'd it May", is fearful for her eggs "Lest the rude blast should snap the bough,/ And spread her golden hopes below." The storm passes and she thinks all is safe. The following morning, however, neighbour Hodge steals her eggs as a gift for "his expecting fair". The old and trite "don't count your eggs" becomes a statement on the Evangelical doctrine of Providence.

> 'Tis Providence alone secures,
> In ev'ry change, but mine and your's:
> Safety consists not in escape
> From dangers of a frightful shape;
> An earthquake may be bid to spare
> The man that's strangled by a hair.
> Fate steals along with silent tread,
> Found oft'nest in what least we dread,
> Frowns in the storm with angry brow,
> But in the sunshine strikes the blow.
> (30-39)

This poem has some excellent lines also. "Fate steals along with

silent tread", is excellent in its choice of the verb "steals", for Fate, especially sinister and death-dealing in this context, comes uninvited and unwanted, like a thief in the night with "silent tread". The partial alliteration gives added emphasis more subtly than Cowper usually achieves.

The closing line presents again the note of terror which Cowper seems to await in every place of calm. The Evangelical doctrine of particular Providence taught that God watches over and cares for each person, numbering even the very hairs of his head. Here, however, Providence, which "secures in ev'ry change", excludes the raven and the poet. Providence becomes Fate and capriciously delivers from grave dangers only to destroy in the sunshine. He no longer sees God who "plants his footsteps on the clouds, "And rides upon the storms". This kind of terror again and again appears in Cowper's poetry, more often in his longer poems, and leaves the reader horrified at this understanding and view of God. There is undoubtedly a touch of madness here.[21]

At other times Cowper expresses a calm tranquility and the lesson learned fromthe animals is less severe. This is particularly true of those based on his delight in something which has occurred to him personally. "The Dog and the Water-Lily, No Fable", for example, teaches spontaneous, loving obedience to God's wishes. Written in August, 1788, it was published in The Gentleman's Magazine

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21 Kenneth Maclean,"William Cowper", in the Age of Johnson: Essays presented to Chauncey Brewster Tinker (New Haven, 1949), pp. 257-267.

for December, 1791 and later in a pamphlet with "On Receipt of My Mother's Picture" in 1798. In common meter, the poem is one of Cowper's better fables. "No Fable" in the title refers only to the fact that it is based on a true event, not a reference to the genre. The situation is a characteristic Cowper walk along the Ouse. He admires a water lily, but though he tries to reach it with his cane, he fails. On returning from his walk, Beau, his spaniel, plunges into the stream unasked, and retrieves the desired lily and drops it at Cowper's feet. The moral is inevitable.

> Charm'd with the sight, the world, I cried,
> Shall hear of this thy deed,
> My dog shall mortify the pride
> Of man'ssuperior breed;
>
> But, chief, myself I will enjoin,
> Awake at duty's call,
> To show a love as prompt as thine
> to Him who gives me all.

The story is told as a straight-forward narrative with a minimum of embellishment. Its strength is its simplicity. The more personal redirection of the moral reduces the more usual tendency toward preaching at others.

"The Nightingale and Glow-worm", written much earlier, is a more usual fable in form but again adapted to the teaching of an Evangelical moral. Written in octosyllabic couplets, the first verse paragraph of fourteen lines states the situation. A nightingale, hungry from his singing, bends to gobble up a glow-worm. The worm protests God made them both, he to sing and the worm to shine. It would be wrong for him to spoil the bird's song as for the nightingale to darken is glow. The nightingale

agrees and hops elsewhere for his supper. The moral condemns warring factions, especially among those who call themselves Christian.

> Those Christians best deserve the name
> Who studiously make peace their aim;
> Peace, both the duty and the prize
> Of him that creeps and him that flies.

A tale concerned also with problems within the Church, "The Love of the World Reproved; or, Hypocrisy Detected", is more avowedly Evangelical. It was published first in The Gentleman's Magazine for September 1780 and earlier, without the author's permission in an altered version in the Leeds Journal. Newton wrote the lines which are now nine through fourteen. Written in octosyllabic couplets, it moves quickly through the statement of the exposition to the moral. Mohammed had prohibited the eating of some one part of swine to his followers, but he failed to indicate precisely which part. Among Christians, the question of what constitutes worldly behavious has led to similar results. Some see no wrong in cards, others defend plays, another a concert or a race, others hunting and the chase. Soon nothing is considered sinful.

Cowper, finally, wrote two tales on cock-fighting, "The Cockfighter's Garland" and "A Tale Founded on Fact". The first is similar to the tale of Misagathus in The Task. Like almost all his tales, this one is drawn from his own experience. A man of good family and school kept a game cock which consistantly won. In his final fight, however, he refused to perform. Enraged, the owner tied him to a spit alive in order to broil him. When his friends protested, the man threatened them as well. As he raged,

however, he suddenly dropped dead. The lesson is clear. His sudden death was God's judgment upon him for his evil treatment of the cock.

'Tis not for us, with rash surmise,
To point the judgments of the skies,
  But judgments plain as this,
That, sent for man's instruction, bring
A written label on their wing,
  'Tis hard to read amiss.

The second tale, "A Tale, Founded on Fact", was first published in Wesley's Arminian Magazine, January 1783. Written in couplets, it presents an Evangelical contrast to the earlier poem. On his way one Sunday to purchase a fighting cock, a miner met a fellow worker formerly addicted to cock fights but now on his way to the church. As he talks, he persuades his friend to worship with him. Under godly preaching by the Evangelical priest, he too is converted. The next day, laughed at by his mates in the mine for his clean speech, he swears eternal fidelity to God on his knees before them. In the midst of his prayer, he suddenly dies. This tale is not unlike other prose accounts in the Arminian Magazine of other sudden conversions and deaths. In both poems, cock-fighting is secondary to sudden death, in one case as the judgment of God cuts a man off in the full flower of his sins and in the other as a kind of reward.

Personal Lyrics and Unfinished Poems

Cowper's finest shorter poems are unquestionably those which are most personal. The lyric is primarily a vehicle for the expression of an intense emotion, and Cowper like most poets, wrote his best when most profoundly and personally moved. With the exception of two,

allofwhich I wish to discuss here were written in the 1790's and were not published until after 1800. These years were overshadowed by Mary Unwin's increasing illness and finally her death and Cowper's own deepending melancholy and periods of depression amounting to madness. Some of these poems are almost too personal for publication, and though Cowper has personal passages in his longer poems, these late shorter lyrics are more private and intense. With all their intensity, however, there is a mellowed, reflective tone which frequently generalizes the emotion and lifts it above the merely subjective experience of the poet. Cowper also succeeds in evading the trap of sentimentalism to which his chronic self-pity made him particularly susceptible.

"Yardley Oak", fragment though it is, is one of Cowper's finest poems. Begun in 1791, Cowper completed only 184 lines. Quiet and reflective in tone, there is only one awkward moralistic intrusion.

> So Fancy dreams--Disprove it, if ye can,
> Ye reas'ners broad awake, whose busy search
> Of argument, employ'd too oft amiss,
> Sifts half the pleasures of short life away
> (29-32)

The observation is an ungenerous one, and it adds nothing to the quiet flow of the poem.

The outline of the poem is simple and straight forward. Cowper addresses the oak and suggests that if he had not an awakenad Christian mind, he would be tempted to kneel and worship a tree so venerable and old. The Druids may be excused for their worship of trees because they knew not that Christ had shed his blood for

them. They found in tress, like Adam immediately after his sin, a refuge, a place of darkness to hide from the wrath of God whom they had offended. (There is no hiding place for Cowper, however, since he knows no foliage can shie[1]d one from the eyes of God.)

By contemplating the tree, he sees it as it must have been as an acorn, sosmall

> the thievish jay
> Seeking her food, with ease might have purloin'd
> The auburn nut that held thee, swallowing down
> They yet close-folded latitude of boughs
> And all thine embryo vastness, at a gulp.
> (18-22)

Cowper's choice of diction, with the exception of "purloin'd", and image is excellent. The jay swallowing down the "close-folded latitude of boughs" and its "embryo vastness" vividly conveys the sweeping potential of the nut and contrasts its smallness to its later vastness.

From these observations, he digresses, wondering who lived when the old tree was only a twig. Trees had been thought in the past to be oracular, but he wishes not to know the future (God will take care of that) but of the past. By so learning from the trees, he would correct history, a task impossible until trees speak.

His concern with the past rather than with the future is another example of Cowper's continuous pattern of retreat. God knows the future, as he states, but that is no consolation to him. The Evangelical Christian's <u>hope</u> was in Christ and the fulfillment of all things in him, a glorious future and eternal. For Cowper there is no hope; by examining the past he may find

something there which would explain his present state. He presents no reason or value in correcting history beyond a discovery of what had happened.

The changes he sees about him, and notably in the oak, are all in one direction. Time, the result of man's sin and subsequent fall, moves only in one direction, from life and promise to death and decay. Time has made the tree what it was at its prime--a shelter for animals; and time has made it what it is now--a blasted ruin of a tree. Cowper traces the various stages through which the oak has passed from a twig to a mighty tree to magnificent decay. Change feeds all nature and finally destroys it.

> What exhibitions various hath the world
> Witness'd of mutability in all
> That we account most durable below!
> Change is the diet, on which all subsist
> Created changeable, and change at last
> Destroys them.
> (69-74)

Using the rhetocial method of the Psalms, Cowper restates the same theme twice with concrete examples and then repeats the generalization.

Then follows a statement which well describes the method of development which Cowper uses with his metaphors.

> Thought cannot spend itself comparing still
> The great and little of thy lot, they growth
> From almost nullity into a state
> Of matchless grandeur, and declension thence
> Slow into magnificent decay
> (86-90)

His method of development throughout this verse paragraph follows a pattern of comparisons, from grandeur to magnificent decay,

from smallness a fly may shake to might a storm may not move.

> Time was when, settling on thy leaf, a fly
> Could shake thee to the root-and time has been
> When tempests could not.

At its prime, the oak might have been selected for building a ship. Now time has slowly cut it down.

> Thus to Time
> The task was left to whittle thee away
> With his sly scythe, whose ever-nibbling edge
> Noiseless, an atom and an atom more
> Disjoining from the rest, has, unobserved
> Achiev'd a labour, which had, far and wide,
> (By man pefform'd) made all the forest ring.
> (103 -109)

With Time's "sly scythe" with its "nibbling edge", Cowper refurbishes a trite metaphor successfully. "Sly", suggests its stealth; and "ever-nibbling", an effective verbal adjective, suggests its incessant, nervous devouring of life. And for all its slyness and nibbling, it is a scythe which mows down all before it relentlessly. Magnificant, through ravaged by time, the oak is still alive. This observation leads Cowper to intrude once again with an analogy comparing the oak tree to a state (England, presumably) whose foundations were well laid though its top has been shattered by "venality". Though little remains now of its former grandeur, when spring arrives, the tree still puts forth some fresh branches and leaves, but death and decay now predominate.

Since the oak cannot speak to the poet, the poet will speak to himself fromthe tree. Thus Cowper shifts to make the personal application of what can be learned from the oak. He too has reached old age. Though his life is short in comparison with

that of the tree, life in retrospect, no matter how long, always appears short.

In his personal application of the knowledge he has gained from contemplating the oak, Cowper finds the end toward which they both have moved is a "wintry bourn". The number of years it takes to arrive at such a goal is of only relative importance. Of importance is the significance of his days. Turning to the Bible for authority, he quotes the words of Jacob:

> Evil and few--said Jacob--at an age
> Thrice mine, and few and evil, I may think
> The Prediluvian race, whose buxom youth
> Endured two centuries, accounted theirs.
> (152-155)

His quotation from his translation of Homer, almost biblical in tone,

> "Short liv'd as foliage is the race of man.
> The wind shakes down the leaves, the budding grove
> Soon teems with others, and in spring they grow.
> So pass manking. One generation meets
> Its destin'd period, and a new succeeds."
> (156-160; Iliad, VI, 175f.)

is dismissed as an "undue complaint" since life is not a thing to be desired.

Herein lies the paradox, however, which the oak presents to him. It is now only a venerable ruin, but it still clings to life with

> root sincere, sound as the rock,
> A quarry of stout spurs and knotted fangs,
> Which, crook'd into a thousand whimsies, clasp
> The stubborn soil, and hold thee still erect.
> (116-119)

The oak presents him with the possibility that there is something more than "evil and few" days. The days of Adam, before the Fall, had purpose and significance, and time as decay and contradiction to

meaning had not come into being. The poem breaks off with a vivid personification of history at the beginning of things:

> history, not wanted yet,
> Lean'd on her elbow, watching Time, whose course,
> Eventful, should supply her with a theme;

The poem is a magnificent fragment. The blank verse is better than that of The Task. The variety of stress and caesura effectively varies the lines. A heavy use of run-on lines contributes to the smooth and reflective forward movement. Some of the images are especially well conceived, particularly those of the acorn enclosing the vast boughs of the mature oak and the comparisons between the twig easily swayed by a fly with its mature strength able to ignore lashing winds. The diction is varied, and though he does use nouns sandwiched between two latinate adjectives in several instances ("excoriate forks deform" and "with prominent wens globose") he has generally avoided the ponderous diction which too frequently marred The Task.

Among his better poems, those to Mrs. Unwin are of particular interest. He wrote only three to Mary, and yet at least two of them are among his finest poems. "The Winter Nosegay" (probably written in 1777, and published in 1782) and "Sonnet to Mrs. Unwin" (written in May 1793, published by Hayley in 1803) are less personal and private than "To Mary" (written during the autumn of 1793, also published by Hayley in 1803). Written in anapaestic trimeter, "Winter Nosegay" is a gracious eompliment to Mary and her devoted friendship to him. Her loyalty in his troubles in a cold world

which knows little of true friendship is compared to his winter bouguet gathered from the greenhouse.

> See how they have safely surviv'd
> The frowns of a sky so severe;
> Such Mary's true love, that has liv'd
> Through many a turbulent year.
> The charms of the late blowing rose
> Seem grac'd with a livelier hue,
> And the winter of sorrow best shows
> The truth of a friend such as you.

Not a major achievement, the poem does escape the purely sentimental and, for an early poem, shows some skill. The "Sonnet to Mrs. Unwin" we have already discussed

"To Mary", in contrast, is more personal and more private. Here too we find traces, but only traces, of Cowper's tendency toward an unhealthy self-awareness if not self-centredness. The poem was written to Mary after a stroke had partially paralyzed her so that she was no longer able to care for herself or Cowper. His choice of stanza is unusual but remarkably effective. Though written as triplets of iambic tetrameter with the refrain "My Mary", the third line contrasts or answers the statement of the first two, and the repetition of the rhyme for the third time gives it extra force. The first two lines at times state directly and simply her present condition; the third answers that the change in her does not make her less lovely to him.

> Thy indistinct expressions seem
> Like language utter'd in a dream;
> Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,
> My Mary!

Tracing her love and care for him, Cowper draws upon the simple and

domestic as the source for his imagery with superb propriety.

> Thy needles, once a shining store,
> For my sake restless heretofore,
> Now rust disus'd, and shine no more,
> My Mary!
>
> \+ + + + +
>
> But well thou play'd'st the housewife's part,
> And all thy threads with magic art
> Have wound themselves about this heart,
> My Mary!

A brief outline of the fourteen stanzas indicates how simple his presentation is. They have lived together nearly thirty years, and now her spirits have grown faint. Though she wishes still to serve him, she cannot. He then describes her physical decay. She can no longer control her speech, and her hair has turned white. To indicate her constant love, she can only return the pressure of his hands on hers. Two must now aid her in every step she takes. Yet she loves, and that above all makes her lovely. He acknowledges that his melancholy has dragged her down and concludes with the fear that his ultimate damnation will break her heart.

All the elements are present for a hopelessly sentimental extravagance. The domestic details and the description of her physical weakness, however, is presented simply and directly without any special emotional appeal. The refrain becomes a sigh from the heart which with each repetition gains in effect. The only false note, it seems to me, is the intrusion of his neurotic belief in his own damnation. It does not, however, shift the centre of emotional identity away from Mary to himself.

The poem is one of Cowper's most personal; yet there is an artistic control which restrains and ennobles his emotion.

The final group of poems are those of personal anguish which express his sense of loss, first, for his mother ("On Receipt of My Mother's Picture"), and, secondly, of his faith in God as redemptive and loving toward him ("The Shrubbery", "To the Nightingale" and "The Castaway").

The loss of his mother at the age of six was probably of great importance in the causes of his later neurosis. "On Receipt of My Mother's Picture Out of Norfolk", written in February, 1790, is of particular interest because it is the only major poem in couplets which he wrote after "Tirocinium". The poem is a meditation growing out of his contemplation of his mother's picture. Speaking to her as if she were alive, he recalls his early childhood joys at her side. The memory of her death, his mourning for her, and his childish hope for her return, early taught him to be the "dupe of <u>to-morrow</u>". Again he wishes her alive, but withdraws that wish when he remembers she is happier now in Heaven with his father than she could ever be on earth. That memory leads him to a renewed awareness of his own abandoned state and loss of Heaven. In language anticipating "The Castaway", he mourns,

> But me, saarce hoping to attain that rest,
> Always from port withheld, always distress'd--
> Me howling winds drive devious, tempest toss'd,
> Sails ript, seams op'ning wide, and compass lost,
> And day by day some current's thwarting force
> Sets me more distant from a prosp'rous course.
> (100-105)

Her happiness in Heaven, however, gives pleasure to him here. These thoughts raise his spirits, and he concludes the poem less depressed.

> By contemplation's help, not sought in vain,
> I seem t'have liv'd my childhood o'er again;
> To have renew'd the joys that once were mine,
> Without the sin of violating thine:
> And, while the wings of fancy still are free,
> And I can view this mimic shew of thee,
> Time has but half succeeded in his theft--
> Thyself remov'd, thy power to sooth me left.

Throughout the poem, Cowper maintains a well-controlled reflective tone. Dealing as it does with a personal theme, the poem is never unpleasantly subjective. The emotion is generalized enough at least to allow the reader to participate in the poem without embarrassment. As with "To Mary", Cowper uses simple, concrete details from the nursery and childhood simply and with force.

> And where the gard'ner Robin, day by day,
> Drew me to school along the public way,
> Delighted with my bauble coach, and wrapt
> In scarlet mantle warm, and velvet cap....
> (48-51)

In that fateful year 1773, in which he first believed he was eternally damned, Cowper wrote two poems, both published in 1782, expressing his anguish at the loss of peace and joy which had followed his conversion. "Ode to Peace" pleads for the return of "peace of mind". His argument is basically that he deserves it, a rather unorthodox position for an Evangelical. He is not ambitious, he lives a retired life away from the distractions of the sinful city, and he is not of the rich and dissipated.

The great, the gay, shall they partake
The heav'n that thou alone canst make?
  And wilt thou quit the stream
That murmurs through the dewy mead,
The grove and sequester'd shed,
  To be a guest with them?

He almost argues that it is all very unfair since he so avidly sought peace and sacrificed so much for it. The poem ends with a question to peace, asking whether they will ever meet again.

As can be seen from the stanza quoted, this poem is stiff and mannered, much less successful and less moving than his hymn "Oh! for a closer walk with God" which also mourns the loss of the sense of God's presence. The hymn, however, is undergirded with the hope that God will return. "Ode to Peace" is rather querulous in contrast.

"The Shrubbery, Written in a Time of Affliction" also expresses concern over his inability to find peace in a natural setting. Though written in the same year, it is more convincing. Poetically still immature, Cowper uses conventional diction but not always ineffectively.

This glassy stream, that spreading pine,
  Those alders quiv'ring to the breeze,
Might sooth a soul less hurt than mine,
  And please, if anything could please.

The poem is interesting also for an early anticipation of the stricken deer passage in <u>The Task</u>.

The saint or moralist should tread
  This moss-grown alley, musing, slow;
They seek, like me, the secret shade,
  But not, like me, to nourish woe!

Nature which was to become his consolation in later years, now only reminds him of former joys.

> Me fruitful scenes and prospects waste
> Alike admonish not to roam;
> These tell me of enjoyment past,
> And those of sorrows yet to come.

The effect of the poem is not achieved through any well chosen image or careful use of other devices open to the accomplished poet. Yet he approaches the edge of hysteria without losing control of the melancholy tone which suffuses the entire poem.

"To the Nightingale which the Author heard sing on New-Year's Day, 1792" is unlike the other poems which reflect Cowper's neurotic depression in that a note of optism is expressed and a calm acceptance of wintry years passed. Why, the poet, asks, have I been selected of all men to hear a nightingale sing so unseasonably? Is it perhaps an omen of better day for me?

> Thrice welcome then! for many a long
> And joyless years have I,
> As thou to-day, put forth my song
> Beneath a wintry sky.
>
> But thee no wintry skies can harm,
> Who only need'st to sing,
> To make ev'n January charm,
> And ev'ry season Spring.

In this poem Cowper has gained that simple directness, the absence of poetic affectation which marred his early work. The central image is clear, the relationship between the bird and the poet is uncluttered, and the diction is plain. The poet's melancholy is now only a part of the background used to high-light the song of the nightingale.

"The Castaway", written March 20, 1799, is Cowper's best known and finest lyric. It is the final expression of a theme which is first stated in his earliest poetry, found in his hymns, in The Task, in other shorter lyrics and in his translations from Madame Cuyon.

The title is taken from I Corinthians ix. 25-27: "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." From the original text, therefore, comes the thought that it is God who will judge and do the discarding of the unworthy. Man must strive, but it is God who disposes. And to be cast away is to be eternally damned.

The motif occurs frequently in Cowper's early poems. In "Mortals! around your destin'd heads", a wrecked mariner does manage to make shore, but only to die there from famine. Another early poem, "Hope, like the short-liv'd ray that gleams awhile", also contains a brief picture of a seaman drowned.

> The seaman thus, his shatter'd vessel lost
> Still vainly strives to shun the threat'ning death;
> And while he thinks to gain the friendly coast,
> And drops his feet, and feels the sands beneath:
>
> Borne by the wave, steep-sloping from the shore,
> Back to th' inclement deep again he beats
> The surges aside, and seems to tread secure;
> And now the refluent wave his baffled toil defeats.

In both, a temporary respite occurs arousing false hope, and the individual dies a more horrible death as a result.

Another poem, "On the Death of Sir W. Russell", written in a letter to Harriet Cowper, later Lady Hesketh, again is concerned with ship-wreck this time with himself as sole survivor.

> See me--ere yet my destin'd course half done,
> Cast forth a wand'rer on a wild unknown!
> See me neglected on the world's rude coast,
> Each dear companion of my voyage lost!
> Nor ask why clouds of sorrow shade by brow,
> And ready tears wait only leave to flow!
> Why all that soothes a heart from anguish free,
> All that delights the happy--palls with me!

All three of these early poems were written during or before the year 1757, that is both before his introduction to Evangelicalism and to John Newton. There appears in the young Cowper, therefore, an early tendency to see himself as a castaway.

His introduction to Evangelicalism, however, did add a new dimension to his delusion and provided him with a more effective language in which to express it. Death now becomes eternal damnation and the lurid colours of hell throw a more garish light on his early torment.

This is most vividly seen in that terrible sapphic, "Lines written During a Period of Insanity", written in 1783 after his derangement and before going to St. Albans. He may have learned the form from Watts's "Day of Judgment", a poem on a similar theme.

Part of Cowper's delusionary system was his belief that God had marked him down for a special and terrible fate. That he was

given a sense of assurance that he was elected to salvation made the voice of damnation in 1774 only the more devastating. The vision of God as the capricious one tantalizing his victims with false hopes and assurance comes through the texture of his longer poems, as we have seen in "John Gilpin" and "The Loss of the Royal George", and is explicitely stated in thos poems published after his death.

In his sapphic, he declares himself "dammed below Judas" avoided by men and damned by God; death and hell are denied him; he is "buried above ground".

> Hatred and vengeance, my eternal portion,
> Scarce can endure delay of execution,
> Wait, with impatient readiness, to seize my
> Soul in a moment.

It is terrifying poem, tapping a reservoir of violence rarely found in his poetry. That in his psychotic condition he could have written anything at all is remarkable; yet here in a difficult form, he has powerfully conveyed his sense of God's implacable hatred against him. It is difficult to think of any other poet in the century who could have written such a poem.

An additional poem on the ship-wreck theme is "To the Reverend Mr. Newton on his Return from Ramsgate".[22] Written in October, 1780 it contrasts the response of the former sailor, Newton, to the sea with that of his own. To Newton, the sea gave joy and left him "tranquil and serene". Cowper finds only intimations of his final personal disaster.

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22 See also the parallels noted by Charles Ryskamp: William Cowper, The Cast-away, edited by Charles Ryskamp, Princeton, 1963, pp. 10-12.

To me, the waves that ceaseless broke
  Upon the dang'rous coast,
Hoarsely and ominously spoke
  Of all my treasure lost.

Your sea of troubles you have past,
  And found the peaceful shore;
I, tempest-toss'd, and wreck'd at last,
  Come home to port no more.

The most curious parellel to "The Cast-away", however, is Cowper's translation of Madame Guyon's "A Figurative Description of the Procedure of Divine Love, In Bringing a Soul to the Point of Self-Renunciation and Absolute Acquiescence". Lured out to sea by God as her lover, her trust and devotion are tested in various ways. Night and storms descend, and she is abandoned with only "floating rushes" to keep her afloat. Even these are then removed, and she is plunged to the bottom of the sea. Briefly restored, her Lord deserts her.

"Wilt thou leave me thus, "I cried,
"Whelm'd beneath the rolling tide?"
Vain attempt to reach his ear!
Love was gone, and would not hear.

Finally she resigns herself to loving her Lord hopelessly even though she may never see him again; essentially the position is that of Cowper's following 1774.

Be not angry; I resign,
Henceforth, all by Will to thine;
I consent that though depart,
Though thine absence breaks my heart;
Go then, and for ever too;
All is right that thou wilt do.

"The Castaway" presents the theme of abandonment by building

upon a simple, brief paragraph in Anson's A Voyage Round the World...by George Anson (1748).[23]

The form Cowper chose for his poem is a standard hymn stanza, but there is no indication that this choice was determined by an ironic intention on his part. He frequently used hymn forms for matter which was unsuitable for hymn-singing.

The first stanza establishes the parallel between the seaman and the narrator and points to a similar fate ahead for him. The tone as well as setting is briefly and effectively set; it is night, the sea is whipped by a storm, and a man has been lost,

> Wash'd headlong from on board
> Of friends, of hope, of all bereft,
> His floating home for ever left.

The narrative simplicity prevents the sensational character of the incident from predominating over the reflections of the poet on the details of the story and his contemplation of his destined common fate.

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23 "...one of our ablest seaman /sic/ was canted over-board; and notwithstanding the prodigious agitation of the waves, we perceived that he swan very strong, and it was with the utmost concern that we found ourselves incapable of assisting him; and we were the more grieved at his unhappy fate since we lost sight of him struggling with the waves, and conceived from the manner in which he swan, that he might continue sensible for a considerable time longer, of the horror attending his irretrievable situation" (Book I, chapter 8).

The competence of his comrades and the warmith of his relationship to them is of no avail. Human love cannot secure his salvation. The double view established in stanza one is replaced by an unemotional review of the facts of the case.

The third stanza is clumsy metrically and awkward and his diction begins to fail him. "Whelming brine" conveys the sense of the function of the sea in the poem, but its poetic elevation violates the plain factual unadorned narration and appears falsely poetic in this context. "Expert to swin, he lay" may be simple incompetence on Cowper's part. An ugly inversion, it also upsets the straight forward presentation of details. Nor does the paradox, "Supported by despair of life" work satisfactorily.

Stanzas four, five and six return to fill out the meaning of the title. His comrades on board do all they can, but they cannot turn about without endangering their own lives. They throw out a few objects to prolong his live, but they have no illusions about the outcome. To have them so near and yet of no avail, to be thrown temporary support and yet to know it is only brief and false comfort, only makes his condition more pitiable. Again Cowper's diction fails him. Every other detail is hard, plain and concrete, unpoetic, but "pitiless perforce" is empty alliteration and is a denial of the emotion of pity to which it refers. It does nothing and violates the tone of the poem. In contrast,

> Yet bitter felt it still to die
> Deserted, and his friends so nigh.

briefly and simply presents the pathos and tragedy of such a death. Surrounded by friends and sustained by their love, yet to see them

scudding still before the wind of life while he, through no fault of theirs and beyond their aid, is doomed is worse than death.

The first four lines of stanza seven are ugly in rhythm and marred by unnecessary inversions. The diction again is false to the poem. Both elements, though "poetic", violate the tone and manner. The closing two lines, in contrast, are functional as narrative as well as powerfully conveying the contradictory cry for help (a despairing backward reach toward life) and farewell.

The concluding stanza, like the better ones before it, gains power by being a quiet statement of fact. Without the narrative preparation and its establishment of tone, the conclusion could be dismissed as hysteria. Instead the remarkable claim comes quietly as a statement of the way things are.

> No voice divine the storm allay'd
> No light propitious shone
> When snatch'd from all effectual aid,
> We perish'd, each alone:

Beyond the help of man, he is also abandoned by God who neither comes to the rescue nor sustains him by his presence.

The concluding couplet completes the whole by its personal intensity and quiet resignation.

> But I beneath a rougher sea,
> And whelm'd in deeper gulphs than he.

The narrative has enabled him to present his case with its full pathos as a matter of fact rather than special pleading and without self pity. The result is an intensification of the impact, as well as a recognition that though he sees his fate as unique, it is the common fate of man.

Finally, it is worth noting the way in which the poetic idiom

of his time seems all wrong for this kind of poem. When his diction is most closely determined by the expectations of his contemporaries, it becomes most false; and the same is also true of his use of inversions throughout the poem. Yet the poem succeeds in spite of several ugly stanzas and phrases ("pitious perforce" and "transient respite"). It succeeds primarily, I believe, through the simplicity of its narration and the general plainness of its diction (with the exceptions already noted). The rhythm, frequently inappropriate in Cowper's shorter poems, here does not distract but sustain the narrative.

Evaluation of Cowper's Shorter Poems

With a few notable exceptions, Cowper's shorter poems are not of lasting value. They were primarily "amusements" and exercises in poetry. Cowper did not see them as serious, and many are written carelessly or without thought. "I am glad when I find a subject to work upon,", he wrote to Unwin in 1780; "a lapidary I suppose accounts it a laborious part of his business to rub away the roughness of the stone; but it is my amusement, and if after all the polishing I can give it, it discovers some little lustre, I think myself well rewarded for my pains".[24]

Within the more limited medium of the shorter poem, Cowper did experiment with a large number of forms. Though most of the poems were written in the more common ballad stanza and its variations, couplets and octosyllabic couplets, in some he used

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[24] Letters, I, pp. 243-244.

more unusual forms. Some of the poems reflect a continuing interest in hymn forms, patterns which are derived from the ballads and carols of earlier origins. In his more successful shorter poems, Cowper was "no metrical experimentor", as Milford states;[25] and on the whole I must disagree with Elton's assessment that his "value as craftsman and inventor his high."[26] His early shorter poems show him learning his craft; a few written after The Task reveal mastery and maturity.

In July 1780, Cowper stated in a letter to Unwin those qualities he considered most important in a shorter poem.

> But still there is a closeness of thought and expression necessary in the conclusion of all these little things, that they may leave an agreeable flavour upon the palate. Whatever is short, should be nervous, masculine, and compact. Little men are so; and little poems should be so....To touch and retouch is, though some writers boast of negligence, and others would be ashamed to show their foul copies, the secret of almost all good writing, especially in verse. I am never weary of it myself....[27]

Not many of the poems Cowper was writing at the time, however, were "nervous, masculine, and compact". Too many suffer from a failure to rewrite and retouch. However, many of the poems as we have them may not have been seen by Cowper as finished. Some were clearly impromptu lines of the moment to enliven a letter.

Where Cowper's poems most often succeed is in their presentation of the scenes and activities of his domestic life with Mary.

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25 H.S. Milford, Cowper: Prose and Poetry (1921), p. 8

26 Elton, op.cit., I, p. 77

27 Letters, I, pp. 207-208.

In these the homely details speak simply and plainly to the reader and give a tone of sincerity. The dangers of sentimentality are great in such poetry, and Cowper can run very near it. Though few now would respond as the young Edward Fitzgerald did ("some of his little poems are affecting beyond anything in the English language: not heroic, but they make me cry," he wrote to Thackeray[28]), Cowper does succeed at his best in speaking from and to the heart.

Only a few of the shorter poems are rigidly Evangelical, though many show a moral earnestness we have come to associate with Evangelicalism. The fables and tales, with their customary avowed intent to give moral instruction, more directly reflect Cowper's religious views than the rest. In the shorter poems, generally however, we are allowed to see Cowper outside of his pulpit and amusing himself innocently. And in a few we share the terror he found lurking in the sunshine and the quiet of his garden.

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[28] Alfred M. Terhune, The Life of Edward Fitzgerald (New Haven, 1947), p.69.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The poetry of William Cowper is that of an English gentleman of the late eighteenth century. Built upon an Augustan base, it expresses the values and qualities of the last quarter of the century coloured and shaped by the religion and personality of the poet.

As a late Augustan, Cowper attempted conventional forms; but in his hands, they are altered to meet the demands of his personal taste and the limitations imposed by his Evangelicalism. His satire, if it may be so called, is polite, gentle and whimsical. It succeeds best when its points are made through the detailed presentation of characters and when concerned with issues larger than the narrow limits of Evangelical piety. His satire is general rather than personal, since satire (or the lampoon) which attacks the individual was unreconcilable with his religious faith. More than a negative denunciation of social and personal evil, his satire is the vehicle for his proclamation of the Evangelical gospel and a calling of people to repentance and faith.

Cowper modifies the couplet and makes it less a unit of thought. Instead the verse paragraph becomes the unit of composition. Though he praises strength, his lines are rarely strong. His manner is discursive and repetitious and lacks the greater logical control of Pope. When his couplets are successful, forceful verbs hammer the meaning firmly into place.

In The Task, Cowper adapts the descriptive, reflective poem of philosophic meditation on nature from Thomson and uses it as a basis for expressing his more explicitly Christian concerns. His meditations on the pleasures and value of domestic tranquility are coloured by a philosophic and religious pessimism which is strikingly different from Thomson and is a personal modification of Evangelical beliefs about the Last Things.

His blank verse is rather uneven, marred again and again by the limitations of an Augustan idiom which is no longer a living medium to him. At times Latinate adjectives ponderously sandwich simple nouns. Only in "Yardley Oak" does blank verse become a flexible and successful medium for his thoughts. Cowper is remarkably successful, however, in depicting small scenes drawn from his experience with rural life and people. The sketches brilliantly portray the movements, almost the thoughts, of birds and animals with^out the sentimentality that sometimes mars Burns and Coleridge. Over all The Task is suffused the gentle colours of his personality, occasionally underscored with heavy blackness from his mental illness and personal despair.

Throughout all of Cowper's poetry, his intimate and special knowledge of the Bible is abundantly clear. Among his earliest verse is a paraphrase of a psalm; and in less literal ways, the language of Scripture occurs frequently in his later mature poetry. Every hymn he wrote for the Olney Hymns depends heavily on the Bible for themes and authoritative language. The special inspired status

of the Bible led him to use its language to present Evangelical "truth". It also gave additional support to the Augustan values of plainness and simplicity.

This heavy dependence upon "scriptural language", however, too frequently betrayed him into the mechanical and biblical jargon common among the Evangelicals; but as he matured as a poet, he discarded the more literal use of biblical words and sometimes succeeds in transforming a scriptural phrase into a powerful image in his poetry. Among his more successful biblical poems are a few great hymns ("O for a closer walk with God" and "God moves in a mysterious way") which are sound poetry as well. In The Task and the satires, some of his better, as well as some of his worst, lines are explicitly biblical. From the Bible also he draws some of his more terrible images to express his damnation and despair.

Evangelicalism was of mixed value to him as a poet. It provided a potent language to express his sense of alienation and despair, but it also narrowed his range of appreciation for many aspects of life. Cowper's sympathies were restricted, and the more negative aspects of his rejection of life may have been encouraged by his religious views. He may have turned to Evangelicalism, however, because he found confirmed in its doctrines an at least superficially rational explanation for his experiences in life.

When Cowper succeeds as a poet, he is the characteristic English gentleman of sound education and sturdy Puritan values. His poetry is low-pressured and quiet, except when he wishes to thunder his denunciation of sin. But even then he does not wish to be impolite or to raise his voice. His praise is for the simple life of retirement surrounded and supported by a few friends

of like mind. His pleasures also are simple and domestic. He writes of rural walks, animals (always small and usually domesticated) and of the gently rolling countryside of that most domesticated of English landscapes. The sensibility is that of a gentleman, but it is almost feminine as well. He lacks the vigorous masculinity of Thomson, and his fear of the Sussex hills is characteristic of his taste. He succeeds, as Dutch genre painting does, when his words act as a shaft of light brightening the simple and plain domestic interior or the almost equally domesticated nature of his garden and ruralwalks.

Cowper fails as a poet when he attempts to describe that to which he cannot fully respond. The more powerful emotions were not felt by him. He was a warm friend, but never a passionate lover. He is irritated and annoyed with much in his society, but he seems incapable of burning hatred. He preferred not to have his emotions too deeply stirred. When he attempts to elevate his diction in keeping with his high and serious theme, he is forced to depend upon the poetic idiom of the period. This language, however, could not help him to enter through his imagination into those experiences in life which were temperamentally inaccessible to him. In such cases, his poetry appears empty and insincere.

The only exception to his limited range occurs in those poems which express his sense of alienation and despair. These, however, are also marred by an occasional reliance upon a poetic diction

inadequate to convey his emotion. Only in despair does he appear to have felt strongly, but even there it is renunciation of hope and an acquiescence to his destiny. He neither struggles against his fate nor does he cry out against the darkness. Quietly and sensibly, he accepts his limitations and works admirably within them. It is an unpretentious courage, like his poetry, which may be too easily undervalued in an age of violence.

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